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a *NEW* short story by

P. D. JAMES

first publication in the United States

In her lead interview with P. D. James in her recently published collection of interviews with detective novelists, Designs of Darkness, *Diana Cooper-Clark asked about the mystery of the human heart that the author writes about in all her mysteries.*

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THE VICTIM

by P. D. JAMES

You know Princess Ilsa Mancelli, of course. I mean by that that you must have seen her on the cinema screen; on television; pictured in newspapers arriving at airports with her latest husband; relaxing on their yacht; bejeweled at first nights, gala nights, at any night and in any place where it is obligatory for the rich and successful to show themselves. Even if, like me, you have nothing but bored contempt for what I believe is called an international jet set, you can hardly live in the modern world and not know Ilsa Mancelli. And you can't fail to have picked up some scraps about her past. The

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brief and not particularly successful screen career, when even her heart-stopping beauty couldn't quite compensate for the paucity of talent; the succession of marriages, first to the producer who made her first film and who broke a twenty-year-old marriage to get her; then to a Texan millionaire; lastly to a prince.

About two months ago I saw a nauseatingly sentimental picture of her with her two-day-old son in a Rome nursing home. So it looks as if this marriage, sanctified as it is by wealth, a title, and maternity may be intended as her final adventure.

The husband before the film producer is, I notice, no longer mentioned. Perhaps her publicity agent fears that a violent death in the family, particularly an unsolved violent death, might tarnish her bright image. Blood and beauty. In the early stages of her career they hadn't been able to resist that cheap, vicarious thrill. But not now. Nowadays her early history, before she married the film producer, has become a little obscure, although there is a suggestion of poor but decent parentage and early struggles suitably rewarded. I am the most obscure part of that obscurity. Whatever you know, or think you know, of Ilsa Mancelli you won't have heard about me. The publicity machine has decreed that I be nameless, faceless, unremembered, that I no longer exist. Ironically, the machine is right; in any real sense, I don't.

I married her when she was Elsie Bowman, aged seventeen. I was assistant librarian at our local branch library and fifteen years older, a thirty-two-year-old virgin, a scholar manqué, thin-faced, a little stooping, my meager hair already thinning. She worked on the cosmetic counter of our High Street store. She was beautiful then, but with a delicate, tentative, unsophisticated loveliness which gave little promise of the polished mature beauty which is hers today. Our story was very ordinary. She returned a book to the library one evening when I was on counter duty. We chatted. She asked my advice about novels for her mother. I spent as long as I dared finding suitable romances for her on the shelves. I tried to interest her in the books I liked. I asked her about herself, her life, her ambitions. She was the only woman I had been able to talk to. I was enchanted by her, totally and completely besotted.

I used to take my lunch early and make surreptitious visits to the store, watching her from the shadow of a neighboring pillar. There is one picture which even now seems to stop my heart. She had dabbed her wrist with scent and was holding out a bare arm over

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the counter so that a prospective customer could smell the perfume. She was totally absorbed, her young face gravely preoccupied. I watched her, silently, and felt the tears smarting my eyes.

It was a miracle when she agreed to marry me. Her mother (she had no father) was reconciled if not enthusiastic about the match. She didn't, as she made it abundantly plain, consider me much of a catch. But I had a good job, with prospects; I was educated; I was steady and reliable; I spoke with a grammar-school accent which, while she affected to deride it, raised my status in her eyes. Besides, any marriage for Elsie was better than none. I was dimly aware when I bothered to think about Elsie in relation to anyone but myself that she and her mother didn't get on.

Mrs. Bowman made, as she described it, a splash. There was a full choir and a peal of bells. The church hall was hired and a sit-down meal, ostentatiously unsuitable and badly cooked, was served to eighty guests. Between the pangs of nervousness and indigestion, I was conscious of smirking waiters in short white jackets, a couple of giggling bridesmaids from the store, their freckled arms bulging from pink taffeta sleeves, hearty male relatives, red-faced and with buttonholes of carnation and waving fern, who made indelicate jokes and clapped me painfully between the shoulders. There were speeches and warm champagne. And, in the middle of it all, Elsie, my Elsie, like a white rose.

I suppose it was stupid of me to imagine that I could hold her. The mere sight of our morning faces, smiling at each other's reflection in the bedroom mirror, should have warned me it couldn't last. But, poor deluded fool, I never dreamed that I might lose her except by death. Her death I dared not contemplate, and I was afraid for the first time of my own. Happiness had made a coward of me. We moved into a new bungalow, chosen by Elsie, sat in new chairs chosen by Elsie, slept in a befrilled bed chosen by Elsie. I was so happy that it was like passing into a new phase of existence, breathing a different air, seeing the most ordinary things as if they were newly created. One isn't necessarily humble when greatly in love. Is it so unreasonable to recognize the value of a love like mine, to believe that the beloved is equally sustained and transformed by it?

She said that she wasn't ready to start a baby and, without her job, she was easily bored. She took a brief training in shorthand and typing at our local Technical College and found herself a position as shorthand typist at the firm of Collingford and Major. That, at

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least, was how the job started. Shorthand typist, then secretary to Mr. Rodney Collingford, then personal secretary, then confidential personal secretary. In my bemused state of uxorious bliss, I only half registered her progress from occasionally taking his dictation when his then secretary was absent to flaunting his gifts of jewelry and sharing his bed.

He was everything I wasn't. Rich (his father had made a fortune from plastics shortly after the war and had left the factory to his only son), coarsely handsome in a swarthy fashion, big-muscled, confident, attractive to women. He prided himself on taking what he wanted. Elsie must have been one of his easiest pickings.

Why, I still wonder, did he want to marry her? I thought at the time that he couldn't resist depriving a pathetic, underprivileged, unattractive husband of a prize which neither looks nor talent had qualified him to deserve. I've noticed that about the rich and successful. They can't bear to see the undeserving prosper. I thought that half the satisfaction for him was in taking her away from me. That was partly why I knew I had to kill him. But now I'm not so sure. I may have done him an injustice. It may have been both simpler and more complicated that that. She was, you see—she still is—so very beautiful.

I understand her better now. She was capable of kindness, good humor, generosity even, provided she was getting what she wanted. At the time we married, and perhaps eighteen months afterwards, she wanted me. Neither her egotism nor her curiosity had been able to resist such a flattering, overwhelming love. But for her, marriage wasn't permanency. It was the first and necessary step towards the kind of life she wanted and meant to have. She was kind to me, in bed and out, while I was what she wanted. But when she wanted someone else, then my need of her, my jealousy, my bitterness, she saw as a cruel and wilful denial of her basic right, the right to have what she wanted. After all, I'd had her for nearly three years. It was two years more than I had any right to expect. She thought so. Her darling Rodney thought so. When my acquaintances at the library learnt of the divorce, I could see in their eyes that they thought so, too.

And she couldn't see what I was so bitter about. Rodney was perfectly happy to be the guilty party; they weren't, she pointed out caustically, expecting me to behave like a gentleman. I wouldn't have to pay for the divorce. Rodney would see to that. I wasn't being asked to provide her with alimony. Rodney had more than enough.

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At one point she came close to bribing me with Rodney's money to let her go without fuss. And yet—was it really as simple as that? She had loved me, or at least needed me, for a time. Had she perhaps seen in me the father that she had lost at five years old?

During the divorce, through which I was, as it were, gently processed by highly paid legal experts as if I were an embarrassing but expendable nuisance to be got rid of with decent speed, I was only able to keep sane by the knowledge that I was going to kill Collingford. I knew that I couldn't go on living in a world where he breathed the same air. My mind fed voraciously on the thought of his death, savored it, began systematically and with dreadful pleasure to plan it.

A successful murder depends on knowing your victim, his character, his daily routine, his weaknesses, those unalterable and betraying habits which make up the core of his personality. I knew quite a lot about Rodney Collingford. I knew facts which Elsie had let fall in her first weeks with the firm—typing-pool gossip. I knew the fuller and rather more intimate facts which she had disclosed in those early days of her enchantment with him, when neither prudence nor kindness had been able to conceal her obsessive preoccupation with her new boss. I should have been warned then. I knew, none better, the need to talk about the absent lover.

What did I know about him? I knew the facts that were common knowledge, of course. That he was wealthy, aged thirty, a notable amateur golfer; that he lived in an ostentatious mock Georgian house on the banks of the Thames looked after by overpaid but nonresident staff; that he owned a cabin cruiser; that he was just over six feet tall; that he was a good businessman but reputedly close-fisted; that he was methodical in his habits. I knew a miscellaneous and unrelated set of facts about him, some of which would be useful, some important, some of which I couldn't use.

I knew—and this was rather surprising—that he was good with his hands and liked making things in metal and wood. He had built an expensively equipped and large workroom in the grounds of his house and spent every Thursday evening working there alone. He was a man addicted to routine. This creativity, however mundane and trivial, I found intriguing, but I didn't let myself dwell on it. I was interested in him only so far as his personality and habits were relevant to his death. I never thought of him as a human being. He had no existence for me apart from my hate. He was Rodney Collingford, my victim . . .

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First I decided on the weapon. A gun would have been the most certain, I supposed, but I didn't know how to get one and was only too well aware I wouldn't know how to load or use it if I did. Besides, I was reading a number of books about murder at the time and I realized that guns, however cunningly obtained, were easy to trace.

And there was another thing. A gun was too impersonal, too remote. I wanted to make physical contact at the moment of death. I wanted to get close enough to see that final look of incredulity and horror as he recognized, simultaneously, me and his death. I wanted to drive a knife into his throat.

I bought it two days after the divorce. I was in no hurry to kill Collingford. I knew that I must take my time, must be patient, if I were to act in safety. One day, perhaps when we were old, I might tell Elsie. But I didn't intend to be found out. This was to be the perfect murder. And that meant taking my time. He would be allowed to live for a full year. But I knew that the earlier I bought the knife the more difficult it would be, twelve months later, to trace the purchase. I didn't buy it locally. I went one Saturday morning by train and bus to a northeast suburb and found a busy ironmongers and general store just off the High Street. There was a variety of knives on display.

The blade of the one I selected was about six inches long and was made of strong steel screwed into a plain wooden handle. I think it was probably meant for cutting lino. In the shop its razor-sharp edge was protected by a strong cardboard sheath. It felt good and right in my hand. I stood in a small queue at the pay desk and the cashier didn't even glance up as he took my notes and pushed the change towards me.

But the most satisfying part of my planning was the second stage. I wanted Collingford to suffer. I wanted him to know that he was going to die. It wasn't enough that he should realize it in a last second before I drove in the knife or in that final second before he ceased to know anything forever. Two seconds of agony, however horrible, weren't an adequate return for what he had done to me. I wanted him to know that he was a condemned man, to know it with increasing certainty, to wonder every morning whether this might be his last day. What if this knowledge did make him cautious, put him on his guard? In this country, he couldn't go armed. He couldn't carry on his business with a hired protector always at his side. He couldn't bribe the police to watch him every second of the day. Besides, he wouldn't want to be thought a coward. I guessed

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that he would carry on, ostentatiously normal, as if the threats were unreal or derisory, something to laugh about with his drinking cronies. He was the sort to laugh at danger. But he would never be sure. And, by the end, his nerve and confidence would be broken. Elsie wouldn't know him for the man she had married.

I would have liked to have telephoned him, but that, I knew, was impracticable. Calls could be traced; he might refuse to talk to me; I wasn't confident that I could disguise my voice. So the sentence of death would have to be sent by post. Obviously, I couldn't write the notes or the envelopes myself. My studies in murder had shown me how difficult it was to disguise handwriting, and the method of cutting out and sticking together letters from a newspaper seemed messy—very time-consuming and difficult to manage wearing gloves. I knew, too, that it would be fatal to use my own small portable typewriter or one of the machines at the library. The forensic experts could identify a machine.

And then I hit on my plan. I began to spend my Saturdays and occasional half days journeying round London and visiting shops where they sold secondhand typewriters. I expect you know the kind of shop; a variety of machines of different ages, some practically obsolete, others comparatively new, arranged on tables where the prospective purchaser may try them out.

There were new machines, too, and the proprietor was usually employed in demonstrating their merits or discussing rental terms. The customers wandered desultorily around, inspecting the machines, stopping occasionally to type out an exploratory passage. There were little pads of rough paper stacked ready for use. I didn't, of course, use the scrap paper provided. I came supplied with my own writing materials, a well known brand sold in every stationers and on every railway bookstall. I bought a small supply of paper and envelopes once every two months and never from the same shop. Always, when handling them, I wore a thin pair of gloves, slipping them on as soon as my typing was complete. If someone were near, I would tap out the usual drivel about the sharp brown fox or all good men coming to the aid of the party. But if I were quite alone I would type something very different.

"This is the first comunication, Collingford. You'll be getting them regularly from now on. They're just to let you know that I'm going to kill you."

"You can't escape me, Collingford. Don't bother to inform the police. They can't help you."

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"I'm getting nearer, Collingford. Have you made your will?"

"Not long now, Collingford. What does it feel like to be under sentence of death?"

The warnings weren't particularly elegant. As a librarian, I could think of a number of apt quotations which would have added a touch of individuality or style, perhaps even of sardonic humour, to the bald sentence of death. But I dared not risk originality. The notes had to be ordinary, the kind of threat which any one of his enemies—a worker, a competitor, a cuckolded husband—might have sent.

Sometimes I had a lucky day. The shop would be large, well supplied, nearly empty. I would be able to move from typewriter to typewriter and leave with perhaps a dozen or so notes and addressed envelopes ready to send. I always carried a folded newspaper in which I could conceal my writing pad and envelopes and into which I could quickly slip my little stock of typed messages.

It was quite a job to keep myself supplied with notes and I discovered interesting parts of London and fascinating shops. I particularly enjoyed this part of my plan. I wanted Collingford to get two notes a week, one posted on Sunday and one on Thursday. I wanted him to come to dread Friday and Monday mornings when the familiar typed envelope would drop on his mat. I wanted him to believe the threat was real. And why should he not believe it? How could the force of my hate and resolution not transmit itself through paper and typescript to his gradually comprehending brain?

I wanted to keep an eye on my victim. It shouldn't have been difficult—we lived in the same town—but our lives were worlds apart. He was a hard and sociable drinker. I never went inside a public house and would have been particularly ill at ease in the kind of public house he frequented. But from time to time I would see him in the town. Usually he would be parking his Jaguar, and I would watch his quick, almost furtive look to left and right before he turned to lock the door. Was it my imagination that he looked older, that some of the confidence had drained out of him?

Once, when walking by the river on a Sunday in early spring, I saw him maneuvering his boat through Teddington Lock. Ilsa—she had, I knew, changed her name after her marriage—was with him. She was wearing a white trouser suit, her flowing hair was bound by a red scarf. There was a party. I could see two more men and a couple of girls and hear high female squeals of laughter. I turned quickly and slouched away as if I were the guilty one. But not before

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I had seen Collingford's face. This time I couldn't be mistaken. It wasn't, surely, the tedious job of getting his boat unscratched through the lock that made his face look so grey and strained.

The third phase of my planning meant moving house. I wasn't sorry to go. The bungalow, feminine, chintzy, smelling of fresh paint and the new shoddy furniture she had chosen, was Elsie's home, not mine. Her scent still lingered in cupboards and on pillows. In these inappropriate surroundings I had known greater happiness than I was ever to know again. But now I paced restlessly from room to empty room fretting to be gone.

It took me four months to find the house I wanted. It had to be on or very near the river within two or three miles upstream of Collingford's house. It had to be small and reasonably cheap. Money wasn't too much of a difficulty. It was a time of rising house prices and the modern bungalow sold at three hundred pounds more than I had paid for it. I could get another mortgage without difficulty if I didn't ask too much, but I thought it likely that, for what I wanted, I should have to pay cash.

The house agents perfectly understood that a man on his own found a three-bedroom bungalow too large for him and, even if they found me rather vague about my new requirements and irritatingly imprecise about the reasons for rejecting their offerings, they still sent me orders to view. And then, suddenly on an afternoon in April, I found exactly what I was looking for. It actually stood on the river, separated from it only by a narrow tow path. It was a one-bedroom shacklike wooden bungalow with a tiled roof, set in a small neglected plot of sodden grass and overgrown flower beds. There had once been a wooden landing stage but now the two remaining planks, festooned with weeds and tags of rotted rope, were half submerged beneath the slime of the river.

The paint on the small veranda had long ago flaked away. The wallpaper of twined roses in the sitting-room was blotched and faded. The previous owner had left two old cane chairs and a ramshackle table. The kitchen was pokey and ill-equipped. Everywhere there hung a damp miasma of depression and decay. In summer, when the neighboring shacks and bungalows were occupied by holidaymakers and week-enders it would, no doubt, be cheerful enough. But in October, when I planned to kill Collingford, it would be as deserted and isolated as a disused morgue. I bought it and paid cash. I was even able to knock two hundred pounds off the asking price.

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My life that summer was almost happy. I did my job at the library adequately. I lived alone in the shack, looking after myself as I had before my marriage. I spent my evenings watching television. The images flickered in front of my eyes almost unregarded, a monochrome background to my bloody and obsessive thoughts.

I practised with the knife until it was as familiar in my hand as an eating utensil. Collingford was taller than I by six inches. The thrust then would have to be upward. It made a difference to the way I held the knife and I experimented to find the most comfortable and effective grip. I hung a bolster on a hook in the bedroom door and lunged at a marked spot for hours at a time. Of course, I didn't actually insert the knife; nothing must dull the sharpness of its blade. Once a week, a special treat, I sharpened it to an even keener edge.

Two days after moving into the bungalow, I bought a dark-blue untrimmed track suit and a pair of light running shoes. Throughout the summer I spent an occasional evening running on the tow path. The people who owned the neighboring chalets—when they were there, which was infrequently—got used to the sound of my television through the closed curtains and the sight of my figure jogging past their windows. I kept apart from them and from everyone and summer passed into autumn. The shutters were put up on all the chalets except mine. The tow path became mushy with falling leaves. Dusk fell early, and the summer sights and sounds died on the river. And it was October.

He was due to die on Thursday, October 17th, the anniversary of the final decree of divorce. It had to be a Thursday, the evening he spent by custom alone in his workshop, and it was a particularly happy augury that the anniversary should fall on a Thursday. I knew he would be there. Every Thursday for nearly a year I had padded along the two and a half miles of the footpath in the evening dusk and had stood briefly watching the squares of light from his windows and the dark bulk of the house behind.

It was a warm evening. There had been a light drizzle for most of the day but by dusk the skies had cleared. There was a thin white sliver of moon and it cast a trembling ribbon of light across the river. I left the library at my usual time, said my usual goodnights. I knew that I had been my normal self during the day, solitary, occasionally a little sarcastic, conscientious, betraying no hint of the inner tumult..

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I wasn't hungry when I got home but I made myself eat an omelette and drink two cups of coffee. I put on my swimming trunks and hung around my neck a plastic bag containing the knife. Over the trunks I put on my track suit, slipping a pair of thin rubber gloves into the pocket. Then, at about quarter past seven, I left the shack and began my customary gentle trot along the tow path.

When I got to the chosen spot opposite Collingford's house, I could see at once that all was well. The house was in darkness but there were the customary lighted windows of his workshop. I saw that the cabin cruiser was moored against the boathouse. I stood very still and listened. There was no sound. Even the light breeze had died and the yellowing leaves on the riverside elms hung motionless. The tow path was completely deserted. I slipped into the shadow of the hedge where the trees grew thickest and found the place I had already selected. I put on the rubber gloves, slipped out of the track suit, and left it folded around my running shoes in the shadow of the hedge. Then, still watching carefully to left and right, I made my way to the river.

I knew just where I must enter and leave the water. I had selected a place where the bank curved gently, where the water was shallow and the bottom was firm and comparatively free of mud. The water struck very cold, but I expected that. Every night during that autumn I had bathed in cold water to accustom my body to the shock. I swam across the river with my methodical but quiet breast stroke, hardly disturbing the dark surface of the water. I tried to keep out of the path of moonlight, but from time to time I swam into its silver gleam and saw my red-gloved hands parting in front of me as if they were already stained with blood.

I used Collingford's landing stage to clamber out the other side. Again I stood still and listened. There was no sound except for the constant moaning of the river and the solitary cry of a night bird.

I made my way silently over the grass. Outside the door of his workroom, I paused again. I could hear the noise of some kind of machinery. I wondered whether the door would be locked, but it opened easily when I turned the handle. I moved into a blaze of light.

I knew exactly what I had to do. I was perfectly calm. It was over in about four seconds. I don't think he really had a chance. He was absorbed in what he had been doing, bending over a lathe, and the sight of an almost naked man, walking purposely towards him, left

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him literally impotent with surprise. But, after that first paralyzing second, he knew me. Oh, yes, he knew me!

I drew my right hand from behind my back and struck. The knife went in as sweetly as if the flesh had been butter. He staggered and fell. I had expected that and I let myself go loose and fell on top of him. His eyes were glazed, his mouth opened, and there was a gush of dark-red blood. I twisted the knife viciously in the wound, relishing the sound of tearing sinews. Then I waited. I counted five deliberately, then raised myself from his prone figure and crouched behind him before withdrawing the knife. When I withdrew it there was a fountain of sweet-smelling blood which curved from his throat like an arch. There is one thing I shall never forget. The blood must have been red, what other color could it have been? But at the time and forever afterwards I saw it as a golden stream.

I checked my body for bloodstains before I left the workshop and rinsed my arms under the cold tap at his sink. My bare feet made no marks on the wooden block flooring. I closed the door quietly after me and, once again, stood listening. Still no sound. The house was dark and empty.

The return journey was more exhausting than I had thought possible. The river seemed to have widened and I thought I'd never reach my home shore. I was glad I'd chosen a shallow part of the stream and that the bank was firm. I doubt whether I could have drawn myself up through a welter of mud and slime.

I was shivering violently as I zipped up my track suit and it took me precious seconds to get on my running shoes. After I had run about a mile down the tow path, I weighted the bag containing the knife with stones from the path and hurled it into the middle of the river.

I guessed that they would drag part of the Thames for the weapon, but they could hardly search the whole stream. And even if they did, the plastic bag was one like thousands of others and I was confident that the knife could never be traced to me.

Half an hour later I was back in my shack. I had left the television on and the news was just ending. I made myself a cup of hot cocoa and sat to watch it. I felt drained of thought and energy as if I had just made love. I was conscious of nothing but my tiredness, my body's coldness gradually returning to life in the warmth of the electric fire, and a great peace . . .

He must have had quite a lot of enemies. It was nearly a fortnight before the police got round to interviewing me. Two officers came,

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a Detective Inspector and a Sergeant, both in plain clothes. The Sergeant did most of the talking; the other just sat, looking round at the sitting-room, glancing out at the river, looking at the two of us from time to time from cold grey eyes as if the whole investigation were a necessary bore.

The Sergeant said the usual reassuring platitudes about just a few questions. I was nervous, but that didn't worry me. They would expect me to be nervous. I told myself that whatever I did, I mustn't try to be clever. I mustn't talk too much. I had decided to tell them that I spent the whole evening watching television, confident that no one would be able to refute this. I knew that no friends would have called on me. I doubted whether my colleagues at the library even knew where I lived. And I had no telephone, so I needn't fear that a caller's ring had gone unanswered during that crucial hour and a half.

On the whole it was easier than I expected. Only once did I feel myself at risk. That was when the Inspector suddenly intervened. He said in a harsh voice:

"He married your wife didn't he? Took her away from you some people might say. Nice piece of goods, too, by the look of her. Didn't you feel any grievance? Or was it all nice and friendly? You take her, old chap, no ill feelings. That kind of thing?"

It was hard to accept the contempt in his voice but if he hoped to provoke me he didn't succeed. I had been expecting this question. I was prepared. I looked down at my hands and waited a few seconds before I spoke. I knew exactly what I would say.

"I could have killed Collingford myself when she first told me about him. But I had to come to terms with it. She went for the money, you see. And if that's the kind of wife you have, well, she's going to leave you sooner or later. Better sooner than when you have a family. You tell yourself 'good riddance.' I don't mean I felt that at first, of course. But I did feel it in the end. Sooner than I expected, really."

That was all I said about Elsie then or ever. They came back three times. They asked if they could look round my shack. They looked round it. They took away two of my suits and the track suit for examination. Two weeks later they returned them without comment. I never knew what they suspected, or even if they did suspect. Each time they came I said less, not more. I never varied my story. I never allowed them to provoke me into discussing my marriage or speculating about the crime. I just sat there, telling them the

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same thing over and over again. I never felt in any real danger. I knew that they had dragged some length of the river but that they hadn't found the weapon. In the end they gave up. I always had the feeling that I was pretty low on their list of suspects and that, by the end, their visits were merely a matter of form.

It was three months before Elsie came to me. I was glad it wasn't earlier. It might have looked suspicious if she had arrived at the shack when the police were with me. After Collingford's death I hadn't seen her. There were pictures of her in the national and local newspapers, fragile in somber furs and black hat at the inquest, bravely controlled at the crematorium, sitting in her drawing-room in afternoon dress and pearls with her husband's dog at her feet, the personification of loneliness and grief.

"I can't think who could have done it. He must have been a madman. Rodney hadn't an enemy in the world."

That statement caused some ribald comment at the library. One of the assistants said:

"He's left her a fortune, I hear. Lucky for her she had an alibi. She was at a London theater all the evening, watching *Macbeth*. Otherwise, from what I've heard of our Rodney Collingford, people might have started to get ideas about his fetching little widow."

Then he gave me a sudden embarrassed glance, remembering who the widow was.

And so one Friday evening, she came. She drove herself and was alone. The dark-green Saab drove up at my ramshackle gate. She came into the sitting-room and looked around in a kind of puzzled contempt. After a moment, still not speaking, she sat in one of the fireside chairs and crossed her legs, moving one caressingly against the other. I hadn't see her sitting like that before. She looked up at me. I was standing stiffly in front of her chair, my lips dry. When I spoke I couldn't recognize my own voice.

"So you've come back?" I said.

She stared at me, incredulous, and then she laughed:

"To you? Back for keeps? Don't be silly, darling! I've just come to pay a visit. Besides, I wouldn't dare to come back, would I? I might be frightened that you'd stick a knife into my throat."

I couldn't speak. I stared at her, feeling the blood drain from my face. Then I heard her high, rather childish voice. It sounded almost kind. "Don't worry, I shan't tell. You were right about him, darling, you really were. He wasn't at all nice really. And mean! I didn't care

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so much about your meanness. After all, you don't earn so very much, do you? But he had half a million! Think of it, darling. I've been left half a million! And he was so mean that he expected me to go on working as his secretary even after we were married. I typed all his letters! I really did! All that he sent from home, anyway. And I had to open his post every morning unless the envelopes had a secret little sign on them he'd told his friends about to show that they were private."

I said through bloodless lips, "So all my notes—"

"He never saw them, darling. Well, I didn't want to worry him, did I? And I knew they were from you. I knew when the first one arrived. You never could spell communication could you? I noticed that when you used to write to the house agents and the solicitor before we were married. It made me laugh, considering that you're an educated librarian and I was only a shop assistant."

"So you knew all the time. You knew that it was going to happen."

"Well, I thought that it might. But he really was horrible, darling. You can't imagine. And now I've got half a million! Isn't it lucky that I have an alibi? I thought you might come on that Thursday. And Rodney never did enjoy a serious play."

After that brief visit I never saw or spoke to her again. I stayed in the shack, but life became pointless after Collingford's death. Planning his murder had been an interest, after all. Without Elsie and without my victim, there seemed little point in living. And about a year after his death, I began to dream.

I still dream, always on a Monday and Friday. I live through it all again; the noiseless run along the tow path over the mush of damp leaves; the quiet swim across the river; the silent opening of his door; the upward thrust of the knife; the vicious turn in the wound; the animal sound of tearing tissues; the curving stream of golden blood. Only the homeward swim is different. In my dream the river is no longer a cleansing stream, luminous under the sickle moon, but a cloying, impenetrable, slow moving bog of viscous blood through which I struggle in impotent panic towards a steadily receding shore.

I know about the significance of the dream. I've read all about the psychology of guilt. Since I lost Elsie I've done all my living through books. But it doesn't help. And I no longer know who I am. I know who I used to be, our local Assistant Librarian, gentle, scholarly, timid, Elsie's husband. But then I killed Collingford. The man I was

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couldn't have done that. He wasn't that kind of person. So who am I? It isn't really surprising, I suppose, that the Library Committee suggested so tactfully that I ought to look for a less exacting job. A less exacting job than the post of Assistant Librarian? But you can't blame them. No one can be efficient and keep his mind on the job when he doesn't know who he is.

Sometimes, when I'm in a public house—and I seem to spend most of my time there nowadays since I've been out of work—I'll look over someone's shoulder at a newspaper photograph of Elsie and say:

"That's the beautiful Ilsa Mancelli. I was her first husband."

I've got used to the way people sidle away from me, the ubiquitous pub bore, their eyes averted, their voices suddenly hearty. But sometime, perhaps because they've been lucky with the horses and feel a spasm of pity for a poor deluded sod, they push a few coins over the counter to the barman before making their way to the door and buy me a drink.

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a *NEW* Dan Kearny File story by

JOE GORES

It has been seven long years since we were privileged to bring you a story about auto repossessors, Dan Kearny Associates, by Joe Gores. (He's been a busy man.) Between 1967 and 1972 we published File stories 1 through 7. "File No. 8: The O'Bannon Blarney File" appeared in the 1973 Doubleday anthology, Men and Malice; *"File No. 10: The Maimed and the Halt" in the January 1976 EQMM. Here, to fill in the gap, is File story Number 9, with Number 11 safe in* our *files—and the promise of publication soon . . .*

Dan jabbed the intercom button so hard he broke a fingernail. "Full Moon Madness," he said into it.

"I beg your pardon?" said Giselle Marc.

"A rock group that has a Maserati Bora Coupe from Cal-Cit Bank, thirty-four thousand owing on it, three payments back . . ."

"Oh, that *Full Moon Madness."*

"It was assigned to Larry Ballard five days ago *and there isn't even a report in on it yet. Have the girls hold my calls, Giselle. I'm going out on this one myself . . ."*

FILE #9: FULL MOON MADNESS

by JOE GORES

Beverly Daniels opened one big blue eye and for the first time in months wished she were in love. Then she moved a shapely sun-browned dancer's leg under the covers and felt Caliban's solid inert weight against her knee. She flexed the leg. Caliban complained.

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"You're a clown," she told him unfeelingly.

Caliban's square whiskered face came into view above the tumbled covers. He yawned prodigiously, stretched fore and aft, and padded up to sit on her chest and purr.

"Get your tail out of my eye," Bev said.

Caliban sprang over the edge of the bed and was gone on silent cat feet to the living room, where he already had discovered a strategic windowsill giving him total command of the street below. Bev swung her legs out of bed, padded barefoot through the new flat with its new paint smell, to the kitchen to make coffee.

Why was she thinking rather wistfully of sleeping with someone besides Caliban? Her last boy friend had been a disaster. Maybe it was being twenty-five years old and doing sensible things like moving two blocks from work, and investing in her own business. Or maybe it was the full moon or something. She put coffee into the inverted paper cone and started heating water. The full moon unleashed all sorts of craziness in people.

Or maybe it was just that the tavern was taking every cent she could raise, she was two payments behind on her car with a third coming up and the bank was going to do something about it very shortly, and she had no shoulder to cry on.

Maybe she'd go open up the bar early. Maybe some really cute guy would come in.

Larry Ballard would once have been characterized as a really cute guy. Twenty-five years old, just under six feet tall, conditioned like an athlete, with a thatch of sun-whitened hair shading even features. Watchful blue eyes. Then the language had changed, and he would have been called a real hunk. It had changed again, and he now probably would have been noted as a very fine unit.

He opened his frayed lace curtains to look across Lincoln Way to the fog-shrouded morning reaches of Golden Gate Park, and wished that he had time to find someone to fall in love with.

Maybe next week. He settled down in his broken-down old easy chair, a steaming cup of exquisite coffee balanced on the arm—he gave his coffee the same care Chippendale had given his sideboards—and considered twenty-three open files screaming for action and reports. Daniel Kearny Associates investigated almost anything involving people, money, or chattels, in any combination, and DKA (Head Office, San Francisco, Branch Offices in All Major California

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Cities) expected twenty-four-hour first reports, with written updates every three days.

Ballard had spent the last five days investigating some abalone up the coast. His files were a mess.

He put the assignments into sequence by address—only in detective stories does an investigator work one case all day long—and found he was looking at a REPO ON SIGHT on a yellow 280-Z. Since the chick was supposed to live over in North Beach but was gone from there, and was supposed to work in a bar on Lincoln Way just a mile from his apartment (but the car never showed up there), she was first up.

In his run through his cases, he missed a file on something called Full Moon Madness, which had a key stapled to the assignment sheet and somehow had gotten sandwiched between two other files in his Hold folder by mistake.

Dan Kearny was a compact, late-forties, hard-bodied man, with a tough square face, an iron jaw, hair, and mind, and a nose that once had met, with considerable force, something harder than itself. He slammed down the phone receiver in his basement cubbyhole at DKA. Cal-Cit Bank was threatening to give all future field work to the competitors unless something happened on Full Moon Madness *right now*. He jabbed the intercom button so hard he broke a fingernail.

"Full Moon Madness," he said into it.

"I beg your pardon?" said Giselle Marc, upstairs in her office in the narrow old Victorian on Golden Gate Avenue which once had been a specialty cathouse but which now headquartered DKA. She was a wickedly lean and leggy blonde with soft lovely features and a hard lovely mind.

"A rock group that has a Maserati Bora Coupe from Cal-Cit Bank, thirty-four thousand owing on it, three payments back, they ran off the bank's man . . ."

"Oh, *that* Full Moon Madness."

"It was assigned to Larry Ballard *five days ago* and there isn't even a report in on it yet." Sudden decision entered his voice. "Have the girls hold my calls, Giselle. I'm going out on this one myself."

Last time Ballard had been in the place it had been a run-down dump with three or four rummies draped over the stick like laundry left out in the rain. Now there were green hanging ferns, brightly

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polished back-bar mirrors, Tiffany-style lamps, and old photos opening faded black-and-white windows on a San Francisco long dead.

The petite girl behind the bar was the same shade over five feet that Ballard was under six, with cornsilk hair as pale as Ballard's, sharp-featured, and exquisitely made under a sweatshirt and slacks. She moved like a dancer and gave him a smile he felt all the way to his toes.

"What can I get you?"

"A yellow Datsun 280-Z," said Ballard with an inward sigh at the cruelty of a fate which would let them meet this way.

The good cheer left her face. "And it was such a nice day." A little hope returned. "Look, we just opened the place last month, it's taking every cent I can scrape up. But . . ."

Ballard said sadly, really feeling sad for a change, "You know I'm going to have to store the car, don't you."

"You don't know where it is."

"You do."

She thought that one over for a while. "I'll get the keys."

Waiting, Ballard wondered wistfully whether she might be able to fall in love with him even though he had repossessed her car. Fall in *like,* maybe?

Full Moon Madness was to be found at 24 Urbano Drive, a perfectly oval street just off Ocean Avenue which, before it had entered the city as an exclusive residential area, had been a racetrack. The area had then gone black, but Urbano had remained WASP black: six-figure mortgages, five-figure IRS estimate payments, Montessori School for the kids. A sprinkler system hazed silver across a kelly-green lawn as Kearny got out of his car. He checked the garage. The Maserati was locked inside. He felt no trepidation, even though the bank's man had been run off by the members of Full Moon Madness. In his experience, bank men tended to go all girlish and shy the first time they saw a lifted lip or a clenched fist.

The man of the house didn't look dangerous. He looked, indeed, like Reverend Ike used to look, his hair touched with a tasteful silver. "Full Moon Madness," he said precisely, "is a corporation."

"It is also three months' delinquent on its payments," said Kearny, dropping the amiability from his face and putting the repossession agency into his voice. "I will have to get the money now or store the unit."

Like-Ike got a very sad look on his face. "Unfortunately, brother,

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the car is not here now. My son, the Archangel Gabriel, is driving it. In astrology, the angel of the moon is Gabriel—"

"The car is in the garage," grated Kearny. "I have to store it *now*. No exceptions."

The ministerial-looking gentleman leaned closer and made a completely impossible three-word suggestion to Kearny, and then added, "No exceptions."

Kearny was about to remonstrate in kind when the door behind Like-Ike burst open and the Archangel Gabriel arrived. He was the size of a Forty-Niner front four, he had green hair cut in a mohawk, and was dressed like a Hell's Angel. He said nothing. He merely swung the tire iron he was carrying at Dan Kearny's head.

Kearny ducked. The tire iron made a coarse round dent in one of the wooden porch pillars. Kearny left with an alacrity perhaps not remarkable under the circumstances. The tire iron made a round hole surprisingly like that a .45-caliber slug might have made in Kearny's window just after he had slammed his car door.

"Sore head," he muttered to himself as he drove away.

With the Maserati locked in the garage, nothing could be done right now—except remember to warn Larry Ballard that Full Moon Madness was indeed a little salty, just as the Cal-Cit field man had suggested.

It had been a good eighteen hours for Larry Ballard. Now, at 1:48 in the morning, he had worked all twenty-three cases he knew he had open, had repossessed three more cars after Bev's, had finished typing his last report, and had found Full Moon Madness sandwiched between a couple of other files in his Hold folder. He would work that one first thing in the morning.

Oddly, he found himself strutting, leaping up and clicking his heels, as he crossed Lincoln Way to his car, his files under his arm. The moon was full, that had to be it. If the moon could cause a tide in a teacup, what could it do in the human body? But, then, as he started down Lincoln Way in a direction definitely not toward the office, he realized that he was going to try to talk Bev into going out with him after she closed up the bar. Could *that* have had something to do with him capering around under the big glowing moon?

"No, you may not drive me home," said Bev in an offended voice. "You took my car away from me just this morning!"

"Then how about I walk you home?"

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"Well-l-l." He was really a very foxy-looking gent. "How about you take me out for pizza?"

But as they pulled away from the curb, Ballard's radio suddenly crackled with released static energy.

"SF-3 calling SF-6. Come in, Larry."

Bart Heslip, another field agent and Ballard's best friend, with a detachable ghetto accent he could use at will. Ballard unclipped his mike from the dash and depressed the red SEND button.

"Who dat?" he demanded.

"Who dat say who dat?" said Heslip in return.

"Who dat say who dat when I say who dat?"

Heslip said, "Full Moon Madness. Dan Kearny says don't work it alone. They ran him off with a tire iron today."

Dan Kearny in the field? Working Larry Ballard's cases?

"Ten-four," said Ballard in a tight-stretched voice. He hung up the mike again. Beverly was staring at him.

"You wouldn't," she said.

"I would," he said.

"*Now?* With me along? Right *now?*"

"Right now," he said.

"There it is," she said twenty minutes later. Excitement danced in her voice.

Lights and decibels now poured from the garage at 24 Urbano Drive. Full Moon Madness was hard at work, rehearsing. Bev was up on her knees, facing backward on the seat like a little kid as they drove by, gaping out the rearview window at the little red sports car parked almost in front of the driveway. As Ballard drove a little bit farther on and parked, Full Moon Madness took a break. They spilled out onto the driveway, beers in hand: the Archangel himself, two other black young men, a young white man, and a white woman vocalist in her twenties.

Ballard opened his door, the Maserati key palmed in one hand.

"They're right in the driveway," said Bev hollowly. "What do we do now?"

"You keep the motor running, you slide into the driver's side, you watch the Maserati in the rearview mirror. When you see it take off from the curb, you follow me."

"But wait a minute! This isn't what—"

He had slid out of the car and was gone with appalling suddenness into the night. She couldn't even hear his footfalls. Icy with fear,

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she played with the mirror until the little red car was centered in it. How did he think he could take it right out from under their noses this way?

Never taking her eyes from the little red car for even a moment, she sought inner tranquility from recalling great moments in literature from her college days. All that came to mind was Raskalnikov's ax descending on the old woman's head in *Crime and Punishment*. Even when a car pulled up alongside and thrummed its engine, she refused to move her eyes from the little red sports car for even an instant.

Ballard had run bent-over to crouch in the shadow beside the Maserati, shielded from them by the car itself, which they luckily had parked over here across the street. The key worked perfectly. One smooth flow of movement had the door open, him into the car, and the door closed again to douse the interior light after only a brief gleam.

He wormed over under the wheel. The throaty growl of 330 horses through the four Twin Weber carbs was almost sexual. What a car! He pulled out abruptly, stopped beside his own car, thrummed the engine twice. The gleaming blonde head did not turn.

What was she doing—transcendental meditation? He had told her to watch the car in the rearview mirror. He slammed his hand against the horn and all hell broke loose.

A horn blared and Bev jerked her head around and there was Ballard. In *another* little red car. *She'd been watching the wrong car!*

She yelped in terror and killed her engine when the Archangel Gabriel, like a giant black bat in his black leathers, landed on the trunk-lid of the Maserati. Two others were jumping into the wrong red little car. Ballard goosed the Maserati and the Archangel fell off. Two more were leaping and jumping around Bev's car like feral hounds. Gabriel had whirled and was tearing at her hood-latch now. She got the car started and started moving. He leaped on the hood to block her vision.

She screamed and slammed on the brakes. The red Porsche rocketed by in futile pursuit of Ballard as the Archangel shot off her hood, hit the street running, got ahead of his feet, and furrowed a lawn with his chin.

Her off-side door was jerked open and the woman vocalist's face

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came across the seat at her as if disembodied, hate-filled, mouth gaping, teeth gleaming vampirelike. Bev hit the face with her handbag as she gathered speed, and it went away again. Her rearview mirror showed her the woman bouncing around in the street, screaming curses.

Hitting 50, 60, 70, Bev went up this street and down that. Around this corner, around that, up hills and down, tires screaming, brakes smoking. Finally she pulled in at a curb, panting as if she had been running instead of driving.

She was parked on the top of a hill on a broad paved street without any houses. She'd never been so scared in her life. Or so lost. Or so alone. Only the red pinpoint eye of the intercom radio told her anything lived outside this menacing street.

Ballard dashed up the stairs to the deserted second-floor clerical offices where DKA's big central radio transmitter was. He grabbed the stand-up mike and flipped the TRANSMIT lever.

"KDM 366 Control calling SF-6. Beverly, unclip the mike from the dash, hold it up to your mouth, push the little red button on the side, and talk into it! Then let go of the button so I can talk to you! Go!"

After a silence, there was a sudden answering blare of static which resolved itself into hysteria-tinged words.

"What kind of crummy date is this?" Bev shrieked.

Dan Kearny stared at the tremendous pile of reports on his blondewood desk. Twenty-three of them, all signed Ballard, four of them repos. But *no* Full Moon Madness. What was the matter, was Ballard losing his guts for the rough stuff these days?

He slid open his little soundproofed cubbyhole door and yelled down the length of the garage to the field agents' cubicles. "*Ballard!*"

Ballard sauntered in shortly, the picture of male animal health, no pieces missing, none of those perfect teeth loose, no black eyes to spoil the deep tan of his manly features. Kearny's hand described a parabola over the reports.

"There's nothing about Full Moon Madness here," he said.

Ballard dropped a three-page report on the desk. Stapled to the original was a condition report. Signed. A signed condition report meant a repo had been effected, and that the vehicle already had been returned to the dealer who had sold it. Ballard had even at-

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tached an executed police report. Nothing left for Kearny to do except Close and Bill.

"Any, ah, trouble?" he asked very casually.

Ballard frowned. "Trouble, Dan? Laying right on the address with two flat tires and cobwebs on the steering wheel. They gave me the keys and a cold beer and waved me goodbye." Then he added breezily, "I'd love to sit around and shoot the bull with you, Dan, but you know how it is—busy busy busy."

Kearny made a small strangled sound in his throat.

Bev unlocked the front door from inside at noon sharp. At 12:01, the door creaked open a crack and a tire iron with a handkerchief knotted around the end was waggling back and forth in the opening. The door opened wider to admit Ballard's blond head.

"Truce?" he asked.

"If you take me to supper tonight," she said. "And no pizza. A *good* place. Something fancy . . ."

That's when she spilled the glass of draft beer she'd begun drawing for him down the front of the new dress she'd worn to work in case he came by to apologize.

DETECTIVERSE

SEMPER FELIX

by JONATHAN WHITE

So baffling was this cat-burglar that
Could sneak in and out and steal and scat,
The police never knew
He never left a clue
Because he was in fact a cat.

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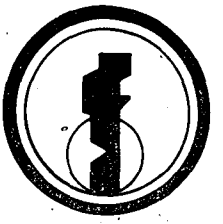

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

EQMM "first story" author #608, Ralph L. Wahlstrom, is thirty years old; has a master's degree in English from Northern Michigan University, and teaches at a maximum-security prison near his home. He is also a working musician/singer. He plays the guitar, banjo, and mandolin in a five-piece band, as well as solo and in a duo. "My wife, Cynthia, says I write well but isn't banking on greatness," he told us. "My son Erik, born last February, hasn't read any of my work yet."

A happy first birthday to Erik. And may there be many of his father's stories in print by the time Erik is able to read . . .

GETTING BURNED

by RALPH L. WAHLSTROM

Delaney's conscience never bothered him when he did a job. It was just a job. Most of the places were old and broken down, tenements infested by cockroaches, rats, and worse—the scum of Detroit's street people. Even so, Delaney always gave the warning in plenty of time. If the people were smart, they got out; if they weren't, they went up with the broken staircases and crumbling walls and ceilings. Either way, it didn't matter to Delaney. He just did a job.

This time things went as usual. The building was a five-story job on the west side. Cardboard and newspaper covered a few of the windows, but most were black holes in a sad grey wall. Nothing moved, no sign of life. Deserted, he thought. An easy mark. A couple of well placed matches and tomorrow morning the slum would be a memory. Someone downtown would be free of the dead weight and a lot richer, and Delaney could make a pretty hefty deposit in his own bank account.

The street was as lifeless as the building. Still, he wasn't taking

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any chances. He slid quietly through a side alley. Several rats scurried out of an overturned trash can and into a gaping window. Delaney shuddered. The darkness at the back entrance was almost complete. Convinced he was alone, he flicked on his flashlight and slid into the open doorway. A door marked STAIRS was on the right of the shabby landing. Delaney pulled it open and peered in.

"Okay," he said quietly, breathlessly, when he saw the plastic milk jug. Jonesy had done his job as usual: Beside the white jug lay a Sunday edition of the *Free Press*. Lots of paper in one of those, Delaney remarked with satisfaction as he stuffed the bulky package under his arm and hooked a finger through the jug's handle.

Although a little breeze had picked up outside, the hallway and the old plaster and wood around it was dead silent. Delaney slowly made his way toward the front of the building, occasionally kicking aside piles of refuse, ancient garbage, and rotting rags. He went in darkness now, a professional habit. On either side, doorways lay open or half open behind twisted hinges and shattered doors, the blackness hiding the interiors from sight. Never mind, he thought. He was not in the business of nostalgia. Sure, each empty apartment had once contained people and their possessions—there had been victories and tragedies here—but they were irrelevant now.

Delaney was lost in thought when a flicker of light froze him in his tracks. Up ahead a couple feet, the muted light brushed erratically against the doorjamb of what had once been apartment Number 1. Delaney approached slowly and leaned forward enough to allow one eye beyond the edge of the threshold.

Inside, an old Negro sat deep within a ratty old chair, beside him a tired wooden desk propped up on one end by cardboard boxes. A small white candle burned feebly from a makeshift lamp and the spectacled derelict held a yellowed newspaper before him—an ancient *Free Press*—studying it as if he were a broker scanning *The Wall Street Journal*. The only other furnishings were a mattress with a few soiled blankets piled on it, and some discarded food containers.

Delaney pulled himself fully into the doorway. "You're not supposed to be here," he said authoritatively. "You'll have to leave." He paused, then added sharply, "Now!"

The man let his paper fall across his knees and he peered over his eyeglasses at the intruder. Delaney noticed one lens was missing. "I been here thirty-nine years, mister. I be married here, had six kids here. This here building be my building. I ain't goin' nowhere."

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The old voice grated thickly, like an engine that hadn't been used for a while and needed oil.

"That's too bad, Pops, but it doesn't matter. You'd better get out now if you know what's good for you." Delaney turned to leave. He'd done his duty by the old fool. If the guy stayed, it was his own fault.

"You a torch, ain't you?"

Delaney stopped and glanced back at the dim staring eyes. He didn't answer. "Ya, you a torch," said the black man matter-of-factly. With that, he shook the brittle newspaper into position and resumed reading as if Delaney had never been there.

"Too bad for you, old man," Delaney muttered, hurrying to the front of the building and down into the basement. His hands shook unaccountably when he began the familiar task of peeling off and bunching up sheets of newspaper, but the job was finished in a matter of minutes. His mind became fully occupied in stuffing the airy material first into the space beneath the wooden staircase, then into the dusty, debris-cluttered corner opposite the stairs. When that was done, he set about the crucial job of sloshing Jonesy's gasoline over the paper and onto the walls. A few drops inevitably splashed onto his feet and clothing, but he'd be long gone before the flames began in earnest. He was a careful man.

Delaney was intent on his work when the old man creaked down onto the first stair. Only when the arsonist had put an even spread of gasoline around the room did he look up to see him and the makeshift lamp of pop bottle and candle.

They found two charred bodies in the blackened remains of the old building. Both had been caught in the basement, where the fire had apparently started, probably set. Arson was a distinct possibility. According to the coroner's report, one was a young man, about forty, who wore a heavy gold ring. The other, a man of seventy-five or eighty, had died of a probable heart attack before being immolated. When the ashes were cooled, the insurance investigator found a few shards of broken pop bottle and a pair of twisted wire-rimmed glasses without lenses.

The man downtown got his settlement. This time he didn't have to share.

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a *NEW* short story by

PETER LOVESEY

The one ambition of four-year-old Jonathan Wilding's life was to be a postman . . . We can't imagine a reader anywhere who won't be charmed by Jonathan, or his parents, or his brother Michael . . .

DID YOU TELL DADDY?

by PETER LOVESEY

Jonathan Wilding, four years old, his tight curls bleached by the August sun, stepped busily through the village delivering letters. He called at every house. They were his mother Sally's love letters.

Jonathan had found them at the bottom of the spare-room wardrobe when he had gone to look for a tennis ball to replace the one he had lost over next door's wall. The moment he had slipped the elastic band off the shoebox and lifted the lid, he had forgotten about the ball. Those bundles of letters neatly tied with colored ribbon had seemed provided for him to realize the one ambition of his young life: to be a postman. Mr. Halliwell, with his peaked hat, grey uniform, bicycle, and, above all, the brown bag stuffed with letters and parcels, was Jonathan's idol, a loud-voiced, bearded man with something to say to everyone he met, including the children. Sometimes he allowed Jonathan to walk along the street with him and guard his bicycle when he propped it against someone's gatepost.

Jonathan's status this afternoon was infinitely more important. With his nursery-school satchel slung from one shoulder and filled with letters, he made his way purposefully from door to door making his special delivery. He knew that ideally the envelopes should not have been torn open at the top, but every one had a long letter inside, often running to several pages, so no one ought to feel dis-

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satisfied. By a happy chance, there were just enough letters to go round. He had covered both sides of the street, slipping two or three through the doors of people who were particular friends of the family, and he was home and watching television before the first knock came at the front door.

Sally Wilding was in the kitchen cooking plaice and chips for her husband Bernard, the author of the letters. Bernard was asleep upstairs. He was a sergeant in the police, with responsibility for one small town and seven villages, including his own, and this week he was on nights. He and Sally had lived in the village all their lives. It was often mentioned that they had been childhood sweethearts, but that was sentimental blurring of the truth. They had ignored each other in school and avoided each other outside until a month before Bernard had become a police cadet. That month, April 1969, had made nonsense of all the years before. Out of nowhere, an avalanche of passion had engulfed them. They had been eighteen and in love and facing separation, for Bernard had been due to report to Hendon Police College, two hundred miles away, on May first. That last weekend, they had got engaged and promised to send letters to each other every day.

Such letters! Sally still blushed at their frankness and prickled with secret pleasure at the unrestraint of Bernard's ardor. If she ever needed a testimony to the force of his passion, it was there in his neatly upright handwriting, more candid and more eloquent than he had been before or since. There had been a few times in their marriage—very few—when she had been glad to take out those letters and read them for reassurance. Bernard was almost certainly unaware that she had kept them.

She heard the doorbell.

"Michael, see who it is, please."

Michael was her first-born, ten years old and pleased to be the man of the house when Bernard was not available.

"It's Mrs. Nugent. She wants to speak to you."

Sally sighed, took the frying-pan off the gas, wiped her hands, and went to see what the village do-gooder wanted this time. Probably collecting for something. Why was it always when the evening meal was on the go?

"I rather think that this belongs to you, my dear."

Sally took the letter and stared at it, unable yet to make the mental leap that linked it with the embarrassed neighbor on her doorstep.

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"Somebody pushed it through my door. I expect they got the numbers mixed. It was already open. I haven't looked inside, believe me."

Sally went numb. She couldn't summon the words to respond to Mrs. Nugent. If a chasm had opened between them, she would have jumped into it at once.

Her mind mobilized at last. Which letter was it, for heaven's sake? What was in it? How could it possibly—?

One of the boys!

Fast as her brain began to race, events outpaced it. Mr. Marsh from across the street came up the path with two more letters in his hand.

She took them, managed to blurt out something approximating to thanks, closed the door, and dashed upstairs to the spare-room to have her worst fears confirmed: the shoebox empty except for one elastic band and three lengths of ribbon.

"Michael, Jonathan! Come here this minute!"

"There's someone else at the door, Mummy."

The reckoning would have to wait. And so would Bernard's dinner.

The front door stood open for the next twenty minutes as Sally's letters were returned to her by a succession of blushing, grinning, or frowning neighbors. Some cheerfully admitted having read the letters. For Sally, the ordeal was worse than a day in the stocks. "I expect it was one of the children," suggested the vicar's wife. "Little scamps. What will they think of next?"

From upstairs, Bernard called out, "Sally, are you there? You didn't call me. Is anything the matter?"

She nodded to the vicar's wife, closed the door, and called upstairs, "Sorry, darling. People at the door. You'd better hurry."

She scooped up the letters from the hall table, hurried back into the kitchen, and thrust them into the drawer with the teacloths just before Bernard came down.

"Who was it?"

"Oh, just about everybody. I'll tell you later. I'm afraid the chips are ruined, but the fish is still all right."

"I'll have some bread with it. One of the boys up to some mischief?"

"I honestly don't know."

"Want to deal with it yourself?"

Sally nodded.

The doorbell rang again.

"Oh, no!"

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She answered it. Miss Sharp, the doctor's receptionist, with two more letters.

Sally returned to the kitchen.

"Letters as late in the day as this?"

She whisked them into the drawer. "Old ones. Got to keep the place tidy." It was hateful deceiving him, but she couldn't face the eruption when he found out. He set high standards for himself, and he expected his family to follow.

He picked up his tunic. "If there's trouble, you can bet your life it's Jonathan. Time we stopped treating him as the baby of the family. He's got to learn."

Sally agreed. Bernard had been more strict with Michael than ever he had been with Jonathan. It showed. Michael was dependable, a quiet self-sufficient lad with a good capacity for concentration. He liked reading, stamps, and model-making. If he misbehaved, it was generally because he put a higher priority on his hobbies than cleaning teeth or tidying his room.

Jonathan was the adventurous one, and naughty with it. He had more than his share of personal charm, which he exploited to the limit.

As soon as Bernard had left for work, Sally questioned Michael. She had always tried to treat the boys even-handedly, even though they responded differently.

"Michael, what were you doing this afternoon?"

"I was at school."

"After that."

"I came home."

"Straight home?"

"Yes."

"What did you do when you came in?"

"Looked at my stamps."

"You didn't go to the spare-room for anything?"

"No, Mummy."

Jonathan, when Sally spoke to him, cheerfully admitted playing postman with her letters. He told her everything. Five minutes later, he was in bed with his bottom smarting.

Downstairs, Sally took out the letters. Two more were returned during the evening. She had decided to destroy them all. She could never read them again without being conscious that the words meant only for her had been looked at by others. First, she needed to be sure that they had all come back. She sorted them into sequence.

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She had never counted them, but she knew Bernard had written her two a week for the whole of his cadet course.

One was missing: the first in the first week of July.

She soon recalled it, by glancing at the next one. Bernard had been waiting for the mid-course tests to be assessed. Keyed up, perhaps, he had poured out his desire for her in a long letter that was a kind of prose-poem to her physical attractions, a mixture of recollection and speculation that she had found wickedly delightful at the time, but now painfully embarrassing.

Which of her neighbors had got the letter and not returned it?

She mentally reviewed everyone who had called, and then in her mind's eye went up and down the village street, checking the houses and their inmates. When she came to Primrose Cottage she stopped. Ruby Simmons. Ruby had not returned a letter.

Ruby was Sally's age. They had gone through school together, but they had never been friends. In those days, Ruby had been an outrageous flirt, the first in their year to appear in eyeshadow and a smear of lipstick, and the leader in every other step towards maturity. The boys had fought battles in the playground over her and she had rewarded them with favors in the cycle shed that were whispered about with sly smiles and sniggers. Sally, who could only guess, had disliked everything about her.

Worse, Ruby had been Bernard's girl for nearly a year before he fell for Sally. This was after they had all left school. Ruby had bleached her carroty-red hair and Bernard had succumbed as if he had never seen a blonde before. She had got a job assisting Mrs. Parker in the general store—after leaving school with deplorable grades—and every night at seven when it closed, Bernard would be waiting to escort her up the street to Primrose Cottage, where she lived with her Aunt Lucy.

That was all a dozen years ago. It had turned out to be the high point of Ruby's life. Events since then had not been kind to her. First, Bernard had abandoned her for Sally. Then she had started going out with the doctor's son, until she had found out that a girl in the next village was pregnant by him. Soon after, she had lost her job in the store. It had been no fault of hers; simply that trade was falling off and Mrs. Parker could no longer pay the wages. Since then, Ruby had lived off social security. When her aunt died in the winter of 1973, Ruby was faced with extra payments for the rent—or moving out of the Primrose Cottage. She had found it necessary to take on casual work as a domestic help occasional mornings that

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she probably didn't mention when she collected her unemployment money. Her hair had reverted to its natural red. She rarely spoke to anyone, and never to Sally.

Was Ruby still so bitter about the past that she couldn't bring herself to return the letter? If she didn't want to speak, she could easily have pushed it through the door and walked away.

Sally got up and went to see if there was anything on the doormat, but there was not. She opened the door to see if the light was on in Primrose Cottage. It was, but she told herself to be reasonable. Ruby might have come home late. Probably she would return the letter in the morning. If she couldn't face bringing it herself, she might well give it to George Halliwell, the postman, and George would know where it belonged.

Bernard was home and reading the paper when Sally got up next morning. She put her hand on his shoulder and kissed him.

"What was that for?"

"Just for you."

"There's something you want to tell me?"

"No."

The post arrived. Sally said, "I'll get it." She hurried to the door and found two bills. Nothing else.

"What were you expecting?" Bernard asked.

"Nothing in particular."

"Want anything from the store? I think I'll take a walk presently and pick up a *Radio Times*."

Sally said quickly, "I can get it."

Bernard said, "I need some fresh air."

She hated herself for her cowardice. She ought to have told him what had happened. He was entitled to hear it from her. It was practically certain that he would hear it from *someone* in the village. Even if by some miracle he didn't, he still had a right to know that the love letters he had written for her alone had been read in every house in the village. She would have to tell him, but she couldn't face it yet.

She bit her lip as she watched him stroll serenely up the street in his uniform, confident of the respect that was his entitlement. She almost ran after him, but she did not.

She watched him pass Primrose Cottage, and a horrid possibility occurred to her. Had Ruby kept the letter to hand to Bernard himself,

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out of some embittered notion of revenge? But he went past and on his way. There was no sign of Ruby.

He was back in twenty minutes with the magazine. He smiled at Sally and said, "How about a coffee?"

"Of course. Who did you meet?"

"Only old George. And Mrs. Parker, of course. I want to do a spot of gardening before I have my sleep. The weeds are taking over in the front."

The morning passed with agonizing slowness. Bernard worked steadily in the garden, greeting people as they passed. From the window, Sally saw Ruby emerge from the cottage, but she turned in the other direction, probably to do some cleaning for Miss Seddon, who had the big house by the church.

Jonathan was understandably subdued this morning. He lingered in his room, keeping out of his father's way.

"Did you tell Daddy?" he asked Sally over breakfast.

"Not yet."

"Will he have to know?"

"I expect so." She hesitated. "Jonathan, did you post all the letters that you found upstairs? Every single one?"

"Yes." He gave a sniff. "I'm sorry, Mummy."

"You went up and down the street posting them in all the houses?"

"Yes. I thought they were just old letters."

"They were, but you had no right to do it."

At noon, Bernard had lunch and went to get some sleep.

Michael was back from school. "Everyone knows about Jon and the letters."

"I'm sure," said Sally, "but as far as we're concerned, it's finished. Go and tell your brother lunch is ready."

Early in the afternoon, she crossed the street and rang the bell at Primrose Cottage.

Ruby Simmons was definitely back. Sally could hear her moving about inside. But she didn't come to the door.

Sally pressed the bell a second time. And a third. She refused to be ignored. Recovering that letter mattered more to her than some schoolgirlish feud.

She called out, "Ruby, this is Sally Wilding! I want to speak to you—it's important!"

There was no response.

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"I think you have something that belongs to me. I want it back, please!"

She walked around the cottage to the back door. Before she got there, she heard the bolt drawn across. She stared through the kitchen window. Ruby must have run upstairs.

It was a Seventeenth Century cottage and Ruby had not done much to keep it up. Sally could easily have forced a window open and got inside, but that would have been a criminal offense. She came away.

At home, she wrote a note politely asking Ruby to return the letter. She delivered it herself. She heard Ruby come and pick it off the mat. That was all that happened.

That evening, after Bernard had gone back on duty, Sally sat listening for footsteps on the path. Several times, when something in the cottage creaked, she got up to check the letterbox.

She was beginning to feel desperate. She could think of nothing else but recovering that letter. She had tried to shake off the obsession by telling herself that as she planned to destroy the letter anyway, she didn't care about it. But of course she did. She cared for Bernard's sake. And hers. And Jonathan's—that small boy who had given her a lesson in telling the truth.

In bed that night, she thought of a way to get her letter back.

Over breakfast, she said to Bernard, "It's such a lovely morning. Why don't you take Jonathan fishing? You've often promised him, and you said yourself that we should stop treating him as the baby. It will do him good to have an outing with his father."

She watched from the front-room window as they went, and she remained there, watching Primrose Cottage.

At about the same time as the previous morning, Ruby came out and turned in the direction of Miss Seddon's.

Sally waited until the street was clear and then crossed to Primrose Cottage and went straight around the side to the back door. It was bolted. She glanced about her. The back windows of the cottage were not overlooked. She took a steel knitting needle from her waistband and pushed it where the wood had warped between one window and the frame.

The catch lifted at the second attempt. She pulled the window open and climbed through.

There were letters on the kitchen table. Hers was not among them. She went into the living room and searched the dresser and the

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writing-bureau. Drawers, bookshelves, windowsills. Where had Ruby put it?

She went upstairs. A tidy bedroom. The bed made. She spotted the photo at once: a small framed portrait of Bernard as he had been at seventeen, before he had cut his hair to join the police. Across it, in his handwriting, the words *To Ruby, lots of love, Bernard.* Sally wished she had not seen it.

She went to the dressing table and opened the drawers. She was feeling sick inside. This was the first really bad thing she had done in her life. It was despicable. It was a crime. Yet she had to go on with it.

She started on the chest of drawers. Passed her hand between the layers of clothes. Crossed to the bed and lifted the pillow.

"What are you doing here?"

Sally dropped the pillow and froze.

"What are you doing in my bedroom?" Ruby demanded in a measured voice.

Sally turned. Ruby had the knitting needle in her hand, holding it like a knife. She must have found it by the open window. She must have gone only as far as the store when she went out.

Sally answered with an effort to sound calm. "Looking for my letter."

"It isn't here."

"What have you done with it, then?"

"I haven't got your letter."

"Ruby, I wish I hadn't had to do this, but that letter belongs to me. I want it back."

"And you think that gives you the right to force your way into my home and search my things? That's unlawful entry, Sally Wilding, even if you *are* married to the policeman."

"I'm sorry. If you had opened the door to me yesterday—"

"I didn't wish to. There's no law that says I have to speak to you, but there is a law to protect my home from sneak thieves and intruders, and it's your husband's duty to enforce it. Does he know you're here?"

"No."

There was a moment's pause.

Ruby's mouth twitched. "Get you in a nice spot of trouble if I report this to the police, won't it?"

"Don't. Please."

"Why shouldn't I?"

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Sally glanced towards the photograph of Bernard.

Ruby said, "You're scum. What are you?"

"Scum."

"Get downstairs. I'll be close behind you."

Sally obeyed. She was humiliated. She didn't know what to expect.

At the foot of the stairs, Ruby said, "Which of your boys was it?"

"Jonathan."

"The little one? How tall is he?"

Sally indicated. "About this high."

"Look at my front door," said Ruby. "See where the letterbox is? My Aunt Lucy had it specially made when the new door was fitted. The kids next door were always playing knock down ginger when they were small, so she had the letterbox as high as possible. Your Jonathan couldn't possibly reach it."

Sally could see that she was right. She should have seen before. She shook her head. She was close to tears. "I don't know what to say."

Ruby said, "Does he know yet?"

"Bernard? No."

There was another pause.

Then Ruby began to laugh. "You poor sap! For the first time in twelve years I wouldn't want to be in your shoes." She opened the door. "Go on, clear off and get what's coming to you."

"Thank you."

"Better take your knitting needle. You may need it."

By the time Bernard came back from the fishing, Sally had braced herself to tell him everything, but he stopped her. He said, "If this is about those letters, save your breath. I heard it all from Jonathan this morning. That little lad is growing up. He thought it was up to him to put me in the picture. That's worth a lot to me."

"Did he tell you about the letter that hasn't come back?"

"He told me you were still upset. I guessed there had to be a reason."

"You're not too angry?"

"How can I be? It's Friday. I'm off nights."

As they prepared for bed that night, Bernard held up an envelope. "Is this what you were looking for?"

She took it from him. "Yes! Where did you find it?"

"Not a million miles from here. I had another chat with Jonathan. Asked him if he stopped at every house."

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"But so did I. He answered that he did. He really did. It just happened that he couldn't reach the letterbox at Primrose Cottage." Sally caught her breath. "He must have pushed it under the door! It was under Ruby's doormat all the time!"

"No. Forget about Ruby. *Every house,* Jon said. That includes this one. He didn't leave us out."

"Here?" Sally frowned. "Jonathan posted one to us? I didn't find it."

"Neither did I."

Her eyes opened wide. "*Michael?*"

"Look at the stamp. That, my darling, was posted on July first, 1969, the day Prince Charles was invested as Prince of Wales. The commemorative stamp. It's gold-dust to a stamp collector: a first-day cover."

"Michael had it all the time?"

"Picked it off the mat and put it in his album. Most of this time he's been at school. Didn't think we'd miss it. I found the letter in his waste-bin. I don't believe he gave it more than a glance."

She felt herself blush. "I hope not. Bernard, you didn't punish him?"

He shook his head. "As a matter of fact, I promised to look through mine for stamps."

"Your what?"

"My love letters from you."

"You kept the letters I wrote *you?*"

Bernard took her hand. "But I had the foresight to keep mine on *top* of the wardrobe."

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a *NEW* Scheherazadian tale by

JAMES POWELL

The Labyrinth of Life was Midaz' masterwork, a vast construction which covered several hundred square acres and had to be traversed on horseback. But the cleverness of what Midaz had wrought lay less in twists and turns and dead-end corridors than in seductive obstacles to lure the traveler from the proper course . . .

There is Jorge Luis Borges on the subject of mazes—you may recall that EQMM was first to publish "The Garden of Forking Paths" in English (translated by Anthony Boucher)—and there is also, happily, James Powell on the subject of mazes . . .

THE LABYRINTH OF LIFE

by JAMES POWELL

My masters, there once lived two kings, the greatest of friends. The elder, King Midaz, called Midaz of the Iron Word, was a great forger of riddles and labyrinths. The younger, King Sardon, called Sardon the Quick, was a famous solver of riddles and runner of mazes. Just as a question seeks an answer and just as the answer to an unasked question must sit forever in silence, so these two kings loved each other.

Now Midaz possessed power over fabulous animals, and at his order winged Gryphons, the giant lion-eagles, scoured his mountain kingdom for gold and quarried it with the power of their mighty beaks. So once a year, when he came down to visit Sardon's fertile kingdom, Midaz rode at the head of a grand and golden retinue. Sardon welcomed his friend with lavish celebrations and banquets to which he summoned the wise men of his kingdom, for each year

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Midaz brought with him a new riddle to be unraveled. Some of Midaz' devices have come down to us. Once, for example, he rose in his place of honor at the banquet table to present his host and the other guests with this enigmatic couplet:

"We left behind all that we caught
And carried away all we did not."

The first night, the wise men blinked and cleared their throats until one of them said, "The wind," because that was the answer to many riddles. But Midaz shook his head.

The second night the wise men tugged at their lower lips and scratched their heads until one of them said, "An hourglass," because that sandy invention is the answer to many riddles, too. But Midaz shook his head again.

By the third banquet, the wise men chewed their mustaches and pounded their temples in despair, but no one had an answer to give. Then Sardon rose with a smile. "Fleas," he said. And Midaz nodded, happy his friend and brother king had found the answer.

And once a year Sardon and his retinue, all clad in silver—the silver water of Scamander River being the Gryphon of his lush kingdom—would ride into the mountains to return the visit.

Now beyond the walls of his craggy capital, Midaz had build many mazes magnificent in size and complexity. Sardon pitted himself against these inventions until at last only one remained unconquered. This was Midaz' masterwork, the Labyrinth of Life, a vast construction which covered several hundred square acres and had to be traversed on horseback. But the cleverness of what Midaz had wrought lay less in twists and turns and dead-end corridors than in seductive obstacles to lure the traveler from the proper course.

Some say Midaz was reluctant to allow Sardon to enter the great maze because no one had ever found the way out again. Others say he feared Sardon would conquer even this, his greatest creation. But Sardon insisted, and Sardon was a brother king and a guest. So with a heavy heart, Midaz watched him spur his horse into the great labyrinth. "You will not return to me entire, my young friend!" cried Midaz of the Iron Words.

The first morning, Sardon made slow, shrewd progress through the maze of narrow, high-walled corridors. Once he came upon the bones of a dead horse and the grinning skeleton of its owner, dressed in fine rags like the remains of a gaudy fly caught in a stone web.

Just after the sun had reached its height, Sardon heard the nearby

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clash of arms and war trumpets. A warrior of renown, an addict of the field of battle where honor and empire are won, he could not resist and spurred his mount toward the sound. For many hours it led him down the labyrinthine corridors. By nightfall the din of battle had faded away. Sardon dismounted to let his horse crop at the grasses growing at the base of the walls. He passed the night wrapped in his cloak and a thick graveyard mist. He was awakened at dawn by the sound of a ram's horn blown by a soldier Midaz had stationed at the exit from the labyrinth.

It took Sardon half that day to find his way back to the point where he'd gone astray. Then he continued on his careful way, resolved that nothing else should distract him from his course. Once when a golden pheasant, a magnificent cock bird, burst up from beneath the horse's feet and flew down a side corridor, the hungry king reached for his bow and almost rode after it. But he laughed at himself and continued on, his afternoon haunted by the aroma of that roasting bird.

As the sun set behind the walls on the second day inside the labyrinth, Sardon came upon a golden kiosk standing in a grove of trees. Beneath the eaves on a golden table lay a loaf of bread, a jug of water, and a bowl of oil with a wick burning in it. All about on the floor lay tomes of mighty knowledge. Sardon ate and drank, and, while a nightingale sang in the trees, he read far into the darkness, for each wise page excited him as much as battle. He read on and on, wiser and wearier, until the nightingale ceased and the predawn birds sang him to sleep.

He did not hear the ram's horn that morning. He awoke late, lingered over the books, and when he finally tore himself away and took up his journey again he cast longing eyes back on the kiosk until it disappeared from sight.

Nightfall brought a cold steady rain. Sardon had just resigned himself to scant sleep under a wet cloak when he saw the glint of a light up ahead. Riding on, he came to the bright warm windows of an inn through whose open door came friendly laughter. Sardon entered and found a great wood fire burning in the broad stone fireplace. He sat down on a bench at a long table and was soon eating a hot meal, drinking mulled wine, and laughing with storied veterans of far-off campaigns and travelers freshly returned from the back of the beyond.

And they listened while he spoke of his own adventures in the war against the green pygmy horde when an army of storks had

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allied itself with his. The cold wind that sprang up to lash the rain against the windows only added to Sardon's snug circumstances. He talked and drank much and late before stretching out on a bench and drawing over himself a cloak which the jolly, fat innkeeper had dried for him before the fire.

When Sardon awoke, he was totally refreshed and his good companions of the night before were still drinking and talking at the table. They called loudly for him to join them, but at that moment the ram's horn sounded. Sardon bid them a hearty goodbye and forced himself to ride off without a backward look. But when the rain began again, heavier than the night before, he turned back but could not find the inn.

Just before nightfall, a lucky shot from Sardon's bow killed a dove and an easier one killed its mourning mate. He tore out their breasts and roasted them on an arrow over a flint-made fire. In the morning he woke wet and stiff. The ram's horn was closer now. He resolved to let nothing lure him from his task.

By late afternoon, after hours of picking his way forward with great calculation, Sardon felt the flow of air change and knew the entrance was near. So when the sounds of battle came again close at hand and real, he felt he could turn aside for a moment. But the din of men dying ran before him one way until the song of the nightingale from the golden kiosk led him another and then the laughter from the Inn of Good Companions called him elsewhere. As the evening deepened, Sardon was completely lost.

But rounding a corner, he found himself in a sweet-smelling bower where the most beautiful woman he had ever seen smiled and rose to greet him from behind a low table set with the finest of foods and the rarest of wines. They dined together. Then, with the moonlight heavy with the scent of flowers, she sang of love.

When the ram's horn announced the dawn, Sardon sat bolt upright on the grass. He set off at once in search of the woman whom he had expected to find at his side. Once or twice he thought he caught a glimpse of a white ankle vanishing around a corner ahead of him. But he never found her. Dejected and despairing, he stumbled upon the exit from the labyrinth where the soldier with the ram's horn stood.

Sardon greeted Midaz with a bitter, "I have passed through your greatest maze, King."

Midaz replied coolly, "King, you have not passed through it en-

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tire." And indeed, Sardon had left his mind and heart within the Labyrinth of Life.

From that moment, enmity replaced the friendship between the two kings. And kings' quarrels are not like yours and mine, my masters. When we dispute, young girls do not cry for their lovers gone to be soldiers nor do raiding horsemen set the night aflame. At last Midaz' golden regiments crossed the Scamander. There was no lack of bravery or slaughter on either side during the war. But eventually the might of Midaz pent Sardon up behind the walls of his capital.

Now in his wisdom, Sardon had provisioned his garrison for a long siege. And he had purposely urged his soldiers to give no quarter so that now they could expect none and would have to fight to the death. Not that it would come to that. The onset of the rainy season would oblige Midaz to raise the siege. By summer Sardon planned to be back in the field with reinforcements from his allies beyond the mountains.

But on the second day of the siege, the sky darkened and a giant Gryphon swooped down over the city, scattering gold coins. Then, when the inhabitants came out into the streets, the Gryphon let fall a cloud of leaflets sealed with the seal of Midaz. "To the soldiers of Sardon," read the message, "I, Midaz of the Iron Word, declare: Open the gates and go your way unhindered, each man with a horse and a hundred pieces of gold. To Sardon, I, Midaz of the Iron Word, promise you your life and a prison worthy of a king."

When Sardon read these words he knew his rival had defeated him. Yet he was still a king. So before his soldiers could desert him, he ordered the gates of the city thrown open.

Sardon's kingly prison proved to be a sumptuous wing of Midaz' summer palace, whose latticed windows looked out onto the entrance to the Labyrinth of Life. Except for the servants who brought him his meals and the musicians who played while he ate, the prisoner was left completely to himself. He occupied his days by pacing the rooms of his apartment and thinking on escape. If time passed slowly, Sardon consoled himself with the thought that as long as there was life in his body the same wheel of fortune that had brought him so low might bring him high again.

Then one day the doors of the apartment flew open and Midaz strode inside with a dark smile on his lips. "Sardon," he said, "you

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once boasted you had passed through my greatest labyrinth. But now I have built another. Perhaps someday you will choose to attempt it. Should you succeed, you would find yourself a prisoner no longer."

Here Midaz crossed to a door which Sardon from his searching for a way to escape knew to be locked. Drawing out a key, Midaz unlocked the door but did not open it. "Behind this door," he said, "are ten rooms in a row, each with a door leading to the other. The tenth room also has a door that leads to the wide world outside." Here the dark smile returned. "But of course I am forgetting the best part," said Midaz. "I am forgetting the Basilisk."

Sardon was obliged to shudder. The Basilisk, or Cockatrice, was a pitiless creature, with the beak, crest, and claws of a great golden rooster. Its serpent body was decked with silver scales and coiled to a fearsome, barbed tip. Even its eyes were lethal and a glance alone could kill.

"Yes," said the smiling Midaz, "in one of those ten rooms is the Basilisk."

Sardon forced a laugh. "Hardly a labyrinth," he said. "At least not one where a sane man would venture."

"Ah," said Midaz, raising a forefinger to tap Sardon's brow, "but the best part of my new labyrinth is in here." He smiled to himself before adding, "Yes, the Basilisk lurks in one of those rooms. But I, Midaz of the Iron Word, tell you this. When you come upon the beast, it will be unexpected." With that he turned and strode from the apartment, saying as he did, "You shall not see me again. Nor shall you ever leave this place except by that door."

When he had gone, Sardon stood in front of the unlocked door for a moment. Then he made a bitter face and walked away, having no need for certain death, for execution by eyesight. He put the door from his mind and set himself back onto the long track of his imprisoned days.

But one night as he tossed restlessly on his silken couch, he thought he heard the sound of battle borne to him on the wind from the labyrinth. The next night he was awakened by a nightingale's song which drew him from his couch to the window, looking out on the entrance to the Labyrinth of Life.

That night before he returned to bed, he stood at the unlocked door and lay his ear against the wood and put his eye to the keyhole. The next night he was awakened by the sound of falling rain. Beyond

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the rhythm of the drops Sardon thought he heard the laughter of good companions from another time and he smiled with loneliness.

When the servants brought Sardon his breakfast the next morning, they found him pacing back and forth before the unlocked door, an elbow in one palm, his chin in the other. When they returned with dinner he was pacing still. He ordered the table to be set so he could eat facing the unlocked door, and he dismissed the musicians so that nothing would distract him from his thoughts.

As he picked at his food, he pondered and pondered. Never had he worked so hard to untangle anything. Ten rooms and a Basilisk. Ten rooms and a Basilisk. Sardon's chewing slowed. Ten rooms and an *unexpected* Basilisk. Well, what did that tell him? It meant that the Basilisk could not be in the tenth room! For if Sardon reached the ninth room unscathed, he would certainly expect to find the deadly creature in the tenth. And Midaz had promised the Basilisk would not be expected.

Sardon sighed. One room down, but nine to go. Nine places to hide a Basilisk. And yet—

Sardon paused with the wine goblet halfway to his lips. And yet, if the Basilisk wasn't in the tenth room could it be in the ninth? After eight rooms without meeting the deadly creature, and knowing the thing could not be in the tenth room, how could it be in the ninth and be unexpected? But if it couldn't be unexpected and be in the tenth room or the ninth, by the same reasoning could the Basilisk be in the eighth? Or the seventh? Or, for that matter, in any room at all? So there was no Basilisk. So Midaz of the Iron Word was a lying hypocrite.

Sardon flushed with shame, imagining the king and his courtiers laughing at their once mighty neighbor held prisoner by imaginary chains. Then a woman's sweet voice raised itself in song from behind the walls of the labyrinth outside the window. Sardon rose and crossed to the unlocked door. He paused to take a might ruby from his finger and tossed it onto the table for the servants so that they would remember they had once been warders to a king. Then he opened the first door and stepped inside.

Ah, no, my masters, it has not come down to us which room contained the Basilisk. But tell me, does it matter? Once Sardon proved beyond a doubt that the Basilisk could not be in any of the ten rooms, then the creature would be unexpected whichever room it was in.

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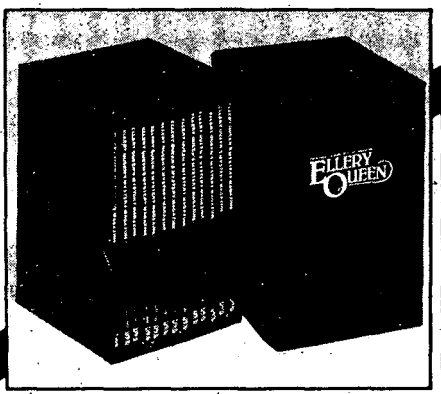

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a *NEW* short story by

JEFFRY SCOTT

It was a measure of Diana's gifts that the prospect of life without her appalled him . . .

DIANA'S GIFTS

by JEFFRY SCOTT

Miles Beguly's meal had seemed delicious on arrival a minute earlier but that was before she delivered her own skilfully prepared dish of the day: an ultimatum. Suddenly wafers of veal dusted in herbs, decorated with paper-thin roundels of fresh lemon, struck him as more suitable for an autopsy slab.

"I couldn't do that, Dee. Believe me—" Wanting to yell, he had to speak softly, because intimate is another way of saying crowded and the restaurant was eavesdroppers' heaven.

"But I don't, angel—believe you." Diana Cartland smiled brightly, the practiced smile of a charming woman perpetually confident that there was no lipstick on her teeth. "Don't get in a snit, I'm not calling you a liar. You *think* it's true. But Charlotte's tougher than you dream."

Not true, a million miles from reality. "We've been through this before," Miles began feebly. It was a measure of Diana's gifts that the prospect of life without her appalled him.

She pressed his lax hand. "Never again, after tonight. Because you'll have to decide. One way or the other."

Then he knew he must lose, informed by the genuine tenderness and concern she showed. It was no contest, beauty and smarts against a woman capable of arousing boredom as his strongest conscious emotion.

Diana returned to her rare steak. He wanted to tell her that he

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felt nauseous, but rejected the impulse. She would only accuse him of backing off a problem, ducking and weaving when life demanded hooks and jabs.

"I'm a fighter, Mr. Beguly," she had claimed at their first meeting, just before his sideways promotion from Personnel to Forward Planning, and bravado had won Ms. Cartland the job. Miles had hidden the smile provoked by her boast, partly because it was the era when male chauvinism was being identified as a social disease, mainly because, in him, courtesy was an effortless reflex.

"Oh, you're kind as hell," Diana had conceded much later in their relationship. Padding naked around the afternoon hotel room, she had added, "Too kind for your own good, angel—and that means for mine, too."

She hadn't looked a fighter, at that opening interview. *Fragile, vulnerable, gamine* were the words triggered by her wistful, catlike little face. A coarser-fibered potential boss might have called her kind of cute and more than kind of sexy but the concept hardly brushed his consciousness.

Fighter, he discovered when she became his personal assistant within a year of joining the company, was a mild label. What he had taken for a newly divorced woman's declaration of intent, a mite overstated for effect, confessed a compulsive duelist's appetite for combat—particularly the corporate variety.

Tentatively at first, with growing bluntness and impatience once he took her advice, Diana taught Miles to play company politics as a game—which in no way implied frivolity. Executives, she explained, were chess pieces. Predictable in that their moves were regulated by personality and rank.

And she was an excellent chess player.

They teamed up at a fortunate point in his career—a point he had then thought was a trough. Aware of an upcoming vice-presidency, his main rivals were closing in on him, tacitly agreeing to make it a two-horse race by laming him in advance. Miles had sensed the alliance but Diana had charted and quantified it, amused rather than concerned, busily polishing his counterattack.

These days Roger Clovis was more or less exiled to the Trenton plant while Herb Bush, lucky to keep his old position, was a mellow former threat who played a lot of golf.

Trying without success to look away from amoeba-shaped puddles of gore as Diana's steak dwindled, Miles reminded himself that he owed her a lot. This dinner at "their" restaurant, for instance, cost

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him nothing. A vice-president's entertainment allowance covered a multitude of sins.

"Eat," she urged. "We need you in good shape. Me—*and* Charlotte—whichever you choose."

Swallowing ashes and slimy cardboard, he whined, "What brought this on?"

Diana dabbed her mouth, finished her wine, called for coffee.

"Five years brought it on. A large investment of my life, angel. Come December, I draw a double line under it all and strike a balance one way or the other." December was hardly a week away; he wished she would stop harping on that last phrase.

She glanced up and signaled. A waiter scooted all the way across the room, snubbing a party that had been waiting ten minutes just to scan a menu, and gave Miles the bill.

"It's a nice evening—let's stroll." Decisiveness was one of the qualities that had fascinated him, the lack of a questioning upward inflection at the end of her suggestions. Marching beside her, stride shortened from habit, Miles admitted it could also be irksome.

"It's very simple, angel. Divorce Charlotte and marry me or it's all over between us. Stay with her and I'll take that job with Jack Snelling. Nothing personal—though he is hungry and your job happens to be his ideal first course. I'm not going—if you *make* me go—out of spite. Jack's a pain but he's the next-most-promising prospect on my immediate horizon.

Miles managed a watery smile. "It's kind of academic whether you go into his corner for revenge or ambition, Dee. The end result is the same, and I don't kid myself I'll like it."

Lightly gripping his upper arm in both small hands, Diana broke into his reverie. He had just been thinking that for some reason, Midtown wasn't the same tonight. Usually he reveled in it, the fiery neon, the spilt jewel-box impact of signs and lighted windows. For once the brilliant grids and the latticework of buildings across the avenue and all the way back to the park depressed and vaguely alarmed him. The patterns had a white-hot ambience of hurt and danger.

Diana spoke without particular emphasis. "And if it is over, I'll tell Charlotte, of course."

Miles stopped dead. "You can't—it'd kill her!" A fine tremor in his lips made speech difficult. "Why be so cruel? It's pointless!"

Frowning slightly, she made him walk on. "You're being your

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dear old sentimental self, angel. This isn't another game for me. I'm not a good loser, anyway. Nothing for nothing, no free lunches, and nobody messes with me. Call it a point of honor, if you will."

I'm a fighter, Mr. Beguly.

She gave him a sideways look after they had covered half a block in silence. "You say that a lot, angel."

It took a moment for Miles to concentrate. "Huh?"

"That something or other would kill Charlotte. A shrink would theorize that you want her to die."

He sensed that she wasn't needling him—or making smalltalk.

"God forgive me, I guess I do. I can't see an easy way out for us, Dee. Any of us. Unless—" He didn't want to analyze his daydream, much less speak of it. "We're doing fine, Dee. Nobody knows about us, and even if they did you don't care."

It was her turn to stop without warning. "I choose to care. I choose! Okay?" Half smiling to cover the rawness of that, she led him onward again. It was pointless telling himself she was hard, for that was what he admired and exploited—it had taken him far and could carry him further.

"You can't bear to hurt Charlotte," Diana mused. "You really can't." Miles dreaded that look, when invisible sutures jumped into place, making white lines at each side of her chin. "But I want you—I don't *need* you, but I sure as hell want you." She nudged him almost off balance. "Come here, to the water. It's more private."

Her coat collar turned up so that it made an arc around her close-cropped, sleek head, her hands deep in the pockets, she leaned against the low wall. Behind her, a section of night gained sharper edges and slid past with a thudding and a slap of disturbed river as tug and garbage scow headed seaward.

Her face was in shadow, unreadable. "If you were free, if we could marry and Charlotte never knew, there would be no problem, right?"

A ruby, the tug's light, distracted him. In any case, she made no sense. He would marry her like a shot, given the opportunity—there was no argument over that.

Diana startled him by going off in a tangent. "I never told you about my dad." Miles had never thought of her as a daughter nor wondered where and how she'd been raised. She was a very adult person, complete in herself. "He's a doctor, though the state medical authorities will be giving him an argument on that soon." She tipped a phantom bottle. "He loves the stuff with a passion."

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"I'm sorry."

"Why be? It's nobody's fault but his own." The disclaimer was etched with bitterness. "My father is a fairly worthless character—except that he does have his uses."

Still at a loss, Miles waited for more. He unhappily registered that it was getting late on a non-excuse night. Charlotte would worry over his absence.

Diana moved closer. "Useful, because I never bother with pharmacies. Dad's careless with keys, and after sundown he's out of it, anyway. Careless, angel—even with the key of the cabinet where he keeps the poisons and the deadly drugs."

Fur crushed under his frantic fingers—fur and flesh—and he felt the underlying bones in her arms. Fear made him lose control, not anger at what she was hinting. "You're crazy!"

She shoved him away so violently that he staggered. Rubbing her bruises, she said, "How dare you! You think I meant it was a chance to get rid of Charlotte?"

Miles gaped. "But—"

Her laugh was a vixen's yelp. "Every time! You'll back down every time. Oh, Miles—you want everything easy and painless. You want me and you don't want Charlotte to be hurt. I'm telling you there's a way out. The stuff's painless and quick, painless because it *is* so quick—lightning. I gave you another option, that's all. Now I'm going home."

Charlotte's talk wound through her husband's busy brain like an indomitable but drearily uninteresting weed. She was reporting her morning's marketing, a lecture on the current price of bread, with digressions to its cost in the Sixties and when she had been a teenager.

Lights in parchment shades gave most of the room a pleasant glow, but Charlotte was bathed in lunar radiance from the muted TV set. His late return had broken into her favorite serial—you didn't need to hear what they said, she told him, she'd just keep half an eye on it.

Despair made him lethargic. Even an occasional priming nod or encouraging noise was an effort for him. Soon he must explain to her— But it couldn't be explained. It was a matter of blunt statements. I'm leaving. You're too old. You're too boring.

Unthinkable, and yet it had to be done. For Dee was a woman of her word—he squirmed in the fat armchair—and just as surely as

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she would help her new boss oust him, she would calmly destroy Charlotte's happiness and stamp out the poor woman's last feeble flames of self-esteem.

So Miles would tell his wife. The trouble was that he couldn't. The idea made him want to cry out. Familiarity had leeched away any vestige of romantic love for Charlotte, but everything in him revolted at the demand to hurt her or let her be hurt.

Painless, quick. Somehow it seemed less bizarre, less impossible, in the context of doing it for Charlotte's sake. Didn't it? Miles wasn't sure of anything any more.

Glancing up, he caught himself seeing Charlotte as a stranger might—objectively, with mild interest. Her face was a map of their long marriage. Lines laid down when she was working to pay his way through business school. The job itself was easy enough but responsibility was a nightmare for her. The faint crescent scar on her plump knee, from the sailboat accident in the second year of their marriage. She had rejected cosmetic surgery because of the cost.

Miles groaned, turning it into a cough, as Charlotte hit the home stretch, her exchange with a check-out kid who had been fresh to her. ("I don't mind a scar, Doctor," she had said all those years ago. "My husband loves me madly, you see, and I'll only be wearing bikinis for him.")

And she was loyal, and the kindest person in the world, and—*and she wasn't Diana Cartland.* Ultimate crime, irredeemable flaw!

Quick, painless.

Sleepless hours later, Miles' emotions had boxed the compass. Originally he had prayed that Dee was kidding him. Now he wanted her to have been serious, fearing that her "option" might be a mirage.

Another night soon afterward, sleepless for different reasons, took Miles Beguly across the divide. Diana lay, smoothly warm, beside him. Here in the hotel's anonymous concrete honeycomb, she would do anything he wanted and propose things that hadn't entered his head.

So beautiful, he thought, and so relentless, effective, unchallengeable. All of it—the intelligence, the attractiveness, and the drive—at his command. But not for much longer unless— It all came back to Charlotte.

Eyes squeezed shut, he asked hoarsely, "That stuff—can you really get it?"

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Diana stopped pretending to cat-nap. She stretched luxuriously and grinned at the ceiling. "It's been in the bottom right-hand drawer of your desk for a week, angel. Ask me for the key tomorrow."

It was illogical, primitive, but Miles was terrified by the tiny bottle. The contents were colorless, though daylight seemed to give them a bluish tinge. Holding it between his finger and thumb, he realized that he dare not turn the stopper and sniff what was inside. He might just as well have been grasping a trapped snake or a hair-trigger, loaded pistol with no safety catch.

Quick, but how quick? Painless? Who could prove that? And Dee might have been lying about both to lend him resolution.

Charlotte appeared at the garage door and he jabbed the bottle into his cardigan pocket. "I'm waiting for you," she said reproachfully.

He walked out and pulled the door down. "Sorry." It was another of her harmless, infuriating rituals. If Miles was around, she wouldn't go into the house without him.

Following her up the outside stairs, his stomach churning at his own callousness, Miles thought how their doctor had been nagging Charlotte for years, ever since the emergence of her slight cardiac problem, the giddy spells and erratic blood pressure: she had to lose weight, he insisted, implying an "or else" without quite putting it into words.

If Charlotte collapsed and died, would it be that unexpected?

She handed him the doorkey, dabbing a kiss on his cheek as he stood aside to let her through. "Perfect day, Milky." It had been a long while since she had used that pet name. "I'm glad you bullied me into going out—I've been getting into a terrible rut."

He wanted her final day to be happy, and although it had been an ordeal for him Charlotte had reveled in the country drive, the seafood dinner, the one drink at an old inn on the way home.

"What're you doing?" she called over the TV's lulling murmur a few minutes later.

"Hot chocolate. Want some?" She always did. She did this time. Miles, his fingers sweaty, extracted the bottle from its hiding place.

"I love you, Milky!" Charlotte shouted.

"I know you do," Miles whispered. He started unscrewing the bottlecap.

Diana Cartland's assurance, of course, had been accurate. She

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didn't make a practice of getting things wrong. The fluid had been quick and painless so far as Miles could tell.

Perhaps it was just as well that not many company people attended the funeral. While the death had caused no suspicion, it was vital to avoid speculation and attention.

Obviously he had to be there, but the woman at his side as the casket rolled through the crematorium chapel's purple drapes, canned music almost obliterating the sinister whir of machinery, was another matter. Hardly a false note, since they were accepted as a pair, but something of an eyebrow-raiser for anyone who cared to think it through.

Afterward, as the car pulled away, Miles patted her hand. "It was good of you to come. And the flowers were tasteful. Better than just plunking down money at some store."

"I'm glad you wanted me with you, darling." Charlotte leaned back and eased her girdle. "Poor Miss Cartmel. Courtledge? You'll be lost without her, I suppose."

Diana's first error had been her last. It lay in assessing her lover's chessman-character rules without taking them to their logical conclusion. He would always avoid direct conflict, forever seek an easier way out, and he couldn't bear to hurt Charlotte. So how in the world could he ever bring himself to murder *her?*

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a *NEW* short story by

JACK RITCHIE

If you were a felon with a prison record—just supposing, of course, folks—and you were about to break into a liquor store late at night and observed a murder, what would you do . . .?

THE SECOND LETTER

by JACK RITCHIE

There is no more deserted place than a small-town shopping center after midnight—or a more conspicuous place to park a car—so I left mine in the darkness of a side street a block away. I took my bag of tools out of the trunk and walked the rest of the way.

I was at the rear door of the liquor store, working on the lock, when I heard a car and caught the flash of headlights turning into the lane behind the store. My first thought was that it might be the town squad car making a routine check of the area, so I ducked into the shadows and hugged the wall.

As the car moved slowly past, I breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't a squad car. It went on for another twenty feet and then came to an abrupt stop.

The passenger-side door swung open and I heard cursing and what sounded like a scuffle. A man tumbled out of the car and he seemed about to dive back when there was the sound of a shot and he dropped to the pavement. A hand reached out from inside the car and pulled the door shut. I found myself staring at the rear license-plate as the automobile roared away.

When it disappeared, I rushed to the spot where the man had fallen and used my flashlight. He appeared to be in his thirties and he was quite dead, with a bullet hole in his chest.

I had just witnessed a murder, but I really couldn't go to the police.

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My parole officer hadn't seen me in over two years and I could get into a lot of trouble if he knew where I was. It would be wise to get out of this town as quickly as possible and forget the whole thing.

I returned to my car and drove back to the big city, arriving there just as the sun rose.

In my apartment, I made myself a stiff drink, and then went to bed. But I couldn't sleep. That license-plate number seemed to have fastened itself in my mind. I wanted to forget it, and I tried to, but it was no use.

Finally I got out of bed and carefully slipped a sheet of paper into my portable typewriter so that I wouldn't leave any fingerprints, and began hunt-and-peck typing.

Dear Sir:

Last night I witnessed the murder of a man in the alley behind the liquor store in the shopping center of your town.

For personal reasons, I cannot go directly to the police. However, I was able to get the license-number of the automobile from which the fatal shot was fired. It is C45-871.

Concerned Citizen

I addressed an envelope to the Jefferson Falls Chief of Police and went out to mail the letter.

Now it was up to the Chief of Police. He'd find the owner of the car, question him, get corroborative evidence, and probably even a confession.

I felt rather good about what I had done. Really quite exhilarated at the performance of my civic duty.

I let a month pass before I decided to go back to Jefferson Falls and have another try at the liquor store.

I arrived in the early evening quite hungry, so I dropped into a café on Main Street. I took a stool at the counter and ordered the day's special, Swiss steak and mashed potatoes.

The girl behind the counter wasn't very busy and so she lingered near, ready to talk. "Nice quiet little town you've got here," I said.

She seemed rather proud to be able to deny that. "Oh, I don't know. We've got our excitement, too."

I had the feeling that she was going to talk about the murder, and she did.

"A month ago, Bob Jenson got himself shot and killed. He worked at the garage down the street."

"Well, well," I said. "So things *do* happen here. Who shot him?"

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"Nobody knows."

I frowned. "Weren't there any suspects?"

"I guess half the people in town were questioned. But the killer's still walking around town. If he's from town, I mean. He could be from out of town or even out of state."

I pondered. Had that license-plate number been that of a stolen car and therefore led to a blind alley? Or had my letter simply gotten lost in the maze of the postal system? If the latter was the case, I would have to rectify that.

After I finished eating, I went to the nearest drugstore and bought some stationery and a stamp. I would have preferred to use a typewriter, but none being available, I used my ballpoint pen.

Dear Sir:

About a month ago I witnessed a murder in your town and wrote you a note to that effect, including the license number of the car from which the fatal shot was fired.

There is a possibility that you may not have received my letter. Therefore, I am writing you again. The license-plate number is C45-871.

Concerned Citizen II

I addressed the envelope to the Jefferson Falls Chief of Police and dropped the letter into the nearest mailbox.

I had intended to take care of the liquor-store job that night and immediately depart. However, I decided to postpone the operation for a day or two until I found out what the police would do when they received my second note. I registered at a small hotel on Main Street.

The next morning at eleven, there was a knock at my door. I opened it and found a portly, gray-haired man in a policeman's uniform standing in the hall.

He studied me. "I'm the Chief of Police here. I got your letter this morning."

I played innocent. "Letter? What letter? I don't know anything about a letter."

He smiled, but without humor. "Your envelope was postmarked Jefferson Falls, so I took the chance that you might still be in town and maybe at a hotel. I came here because this is the only one we've got. I'm not a handwriting expert, but I'd say that the handwriting in the letter matches yours in the hotel register."

He stepped into the room. "Are you positive about that license-number?"

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I sighed. "Positive."

"And you saw Jenson get shot?"

"Yes."

"Can you give me a description of the killer?"

"I'm afraid not. All I saw of him was his arm and hand."

"You're sure this isn't a crank letter trying to get someone into trouble?"

"No. I saw the killing and that's the number."

"Where did this killing take place?"

"In the shopping center at the edge of town."

"You could have read that in our newspaper."

"I've never even seen a copy of your newspaper."

"The coroner said that Jenson was shot about midnight. What were you doing there at midnight?"

I cleared my throat. "I couldn't sleep, so I took a walk around town. I thought that alley was a shortcut back to the hotel."

He seemed to buy that. "All right. I want you to come with me and show me the exact spot where Jenson died."

We went downstairs to his squad car and he drove to the shopping center. I showed him the spot where Jenson had dropped.

Back in the squad car, the chief tried again. "You're absolutely positive about that license-plate number?"

"Absolutely. I can't seem to forget it."

He began driving. I'd expected him to take me back to the hotel, but instead he made a right turn and headed into the country. "Where are we going?" I asked.

"To let my sergeant know about this. He lives just outside of town. It's his day off."

I nodded. "Then I suppose you'll get in touch with the Motor Vehicle Department and trace down that license-number?"

"No. That won't be necessary. I know who it belongs to."

"Who?"

He took his eyes off the road for a moment. "Me."

I stared at him, beginning to feel uneasy. "But the shot wasn't fired from a squad car."

"I don't use the squad car for private purposes. I've got a car of my own."

And then it all came to me. When he had received my first note a month ago, he had recognized his own license-plate number. Perhaps he had even come looking for me, but I was no longer in town.

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But I had made the mistake of coming back and writing another letter.

And now he was sitting beside me. The killer. And he had a gun—a big gun, in that holster.

I began to perspire. "Now that I think of it again, I believe I was mistaken about that number. I have a very *bad* memory and actually I can't see too well, either. I just *guessed* at the last three numbers."

He looked at me again and then smiled, almost sadly. "I believe the note."

I closed my eyes. What could I do now? Overpower him? He was much bigger than I am. Should I throw myself out of the car? I'd probably get killed since we seemed to be doing close to fifty-five.

I was still thinking desperately when he slowed the car and turned into a long dirt driveway. "I never got your first note," he said. "When Jenson was shot, I was in the Hawaiian Islands on my vacation."

He stopped at the farmhouse at the end of the drive. "Whenever I'm gone, Charlie Watkins is Acting Chief of Police, and that includes opening any mail addressed to me."

He opened the door to his side of the car. "I went to Hawaii, but my car didn't. I let Charlie use it while I was gone because he was having trouble with his." He sighed. "Funny how you never suspect one of your own. But now it all comes together. Jenson and Charlie were drinking buddies and Charlie always carried his gun when he was off duty. I guess he and Jenson had some kind of a disagreement. I'll have the state lab run a test on Charlie's gun."

The state lab test proved that Sergeant Charlie Watkins' revolver was the weapon used to kill Bob Jenson. Watkins was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to the state prison.

I was sent back there too for violating my parole. How was that for gratitude? After all I'd done to see that justice was done. No wonder people don't want to become involved.

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

Seebold heard a thump below. His eyes opened, focused on the green clock-dial. Almost four o'clock—he must have been sleeping, after all. More noise downstairs. The front door juddered open and hit the wall. Then silence. He knew who was down there . . .

Here is a story offering further evidence of William Bankier's exceptional way of building characters you can see, terror you can feel . . .

HER VOICE ON THE PHONE WAS MAGIC

by WILLIAM BANKIER

Seebold walked five paces this way, five paces that way, trying to imagine what the woman would look like. Thank goodness it was dark. He could picture friends in cars driving by and saying: "Isn't that Martin Seebold hanging around the telephone building?" Earlier that evening he had spoken with an operator while placing a call to his wife who was visiting their son in Newcastle. The operator's voice did something to him—and here he was. Blame it on the evening, Seebold told himself, excusing his behavior.

The weather was a plausible defense. Days of such quality happen rarely in an English summer. The sky had remained clear since morning. Now there was a sprinkling of stars and the breeze seemed to be coming in off a warm sea.

The door at the top of the steps opened and a girl appeared. She came down awkwardly on chunky heels, lugging a shoulder bag and a plastic carryall. Incredibly, she wore a hat.

"Fay?" Seebold said. "Fay Biore?"

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"948-1090?" They shook hands and teetered off balance, sharing a suspicion that the best part of this affair might have been those flirtatious words exchanged across the romantic anonymity of a telephone connection.

"How about a drink, then?" he said. She was not ugly, only plain. No style to her brown hair, no feminine appeal in the moist, pale eyes, the heavy jaw. She was short, but not petite. "Do you mind the Alex?"

"The Alex is fine."

They walked to the Alexandra Pub and found a quiet corner. She asked for dry sherry and Seebold brought her a large one along with his double whisky. He imagined his wife criticizing him: "The doctor would be thrilled to see you into the strong stuff." But Sylvia was with Gary in Newcastle and would be there for the rest of the week. So Martin Seebold was free to forget he was fifty-six and to behave like an adolescent down here in Wimbledon.

"I've been a telephone operator for ten years," she informed him. Before then, she had sold shoes in a local department store. Went to school in the borough. Born in a house not far from where they were drinking. Parents retired, probably watching television in the old sitting-room at that very moment. A brother named Reg was drifting about someplace or other—getting himself into trouble, like as not.

"I'm local, too," Seebold responded. But their origins were not the same: Born up in hill in the Village, the only son of professional parents, Seebold had elevated himself further by marrying Sylvia and settling in her centuries-old family property on the edge of Wimbledon Common. He skated over this information, concentrating on his two years in the RAF at the end of the war. "I was lucky. I was posted to India with the pay corps. Marvelous."

An hour later the pub bell rang and they were chivvied out onto the pavement. "Care for a burger?" Seebold intended to see the situation through to the end.

"Lovely," she said, taking his arm and heading for the McDonald's sign with choppy steps as if they were crossing a ploughed field. There was safety in the crowded restaurant. If he should encounter a friend, Seebold could fob Fay Blore off as an innocent acquaintance.

"You don't have to see me home," she told him when they were outside again.

"Don't be silly. It's a lovely night."

Her flat was not far—down a laneway off the Kingston Road.

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Seebold found himself, surprisingly, in no hurry to say goodbye. It was like making small talk with the dentist after the session is over. "You live up there?" he said, observing the iron steps and the narrow landing at the top. "It's like something designed to go on a stage."

"Do you want to come in?" She had expected him to be gone like a thief in the night.

"See you to the door anyway." The adventure had turned out fine. He would enjoy describing it to Lionel Henning next time they played gin rummy.

The steps rose beside the glass-roofed kitchen of a fish-and-chip shop. Seebold followed her to the landing, looked down over a railing at peaks of opaque glass, heard the clatter of plates, the roar of boiling oil as a new basket of potatoes went in, saw steam venting from a grating under the eaves. He felt he was in the engine room of a giant ship, a passenger embarked upon a mysterious voyage.

"No, not again . . . "

Seebold turned and saw Fay at her front door. It was hanging ajar, the room in darkness behind it. "Have you been robbed?"

"I know who did this," she said. She moved inside and switched on a light.

Seebold followed her, saw the room disarranged but not as destructively as some he had read about. No slashing of upholstery, no daubing of walls. "Don't touch anything," he said. "Call the police."

She went to a drawer that hung open, knitting-magazines dragged out and scattered on the floor. She found a battered envelope, checked that it was empty. "Forty pounds gone."

"Ring the police now, Fay."

"I haven't a phone." The operator's wry smile acknowledged the irony. "We don't need the police," she said, moving to the door and closing Seebold in. "I know who did this. It was Reg, my brother. He needed money and he knows where I keep it."

"Couldn't he ask?"

"If I'd been here, he would have asked."

Seebold's euphoria evaporated. Here he was keeping late hours with an uninspiring woman who had a criminal psychopath for a brother. "I'll help you clear up."

"I'll put on some coffee."

With the books back on the shelves, they sat at the kitchen table drinking coffee and sipping brandy. She had put on a recording of somebody playing the piano. It sounded to Seebold like underground

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trains but Fay's eyes sparkled when she announced: "Pinetop Smith!" so apparently it was something special.

"What puzzles me," he said, "is why throw down the books and toss the other things around? If it's your brother and he knows where you keep your money."

"I know. Maybe he was drunk." She swallowed some brandy and compressed her lips so thin they disappeared.

Rain began falling a few minutes later. The drops hammered on the glass roof of the fish-and-chip shop. "When that stops, I'd better be off," Seebold said.

After half an hour, they were standing in the doorway watching what was clearly going to be an all-night rain. "You'd better sleep here," she said. He couldn't conceal his dismay. "I mean on the settee. Come on, I won't attack you in the night. Have another brandy while I make up some kind of a bed."

Her sheets were fresh. Tucked in with the remains of his third brandy on the table beside him, Seebold began to enjoy himself. Who could predict what was going to happen to a man on a given day? He grinned to himself as he took another swallow of brandy. He could hardly wait to tell Lionel Henning about his adventure with the spooky telephone operator.

"You all right?" She was in the bedroom doorway wearing a robe of some fuzzy brown material. Her hand was on the light switch.

"Like a bug in a rug." He raised his glass, she blew him a sisterly kiss, and the room went dark.

Seebold had no trouble falling asleep. The drinks and the hypnotic drumming of rain on the glass roof overcame the discomfort of the settee. He couldn't tell what time it was when he drifted awake. The room was pitch black, no sign of dawn's early light. His watch was on the coffee table but he couldn't see the luminous dial for some reason. He put out his hand and touched warm, naked flesh.

"It's all right," she whispered. "Do you mind being woken up?"

"What is it?"

"I was lonely." A little girl's voice trying to be sexy in the dark. "I thought I'd come and see if you were lonely, too."

The approach was so transparent it annoyed Seebold. Or was it something else that made his skin grow cold? He was being put on the spot, asked to perform. He had never enjoyed responding to overtures. Not just physical demands but anything at all, a request

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from Sylvia for him to attend the theater would leave him rigid with annoyance. Because it was not his idea.

"I was asleep."

"Sorry."

At last she had to speak again. "I don't please you, do I? I could tell when you saw me for the first time outside the building. It's one of those things, either it works or it doesn't."

"Don't blame yourself too much." Seebold was calming down. Since he would never see this woman again, he could afford to say something reassuring. He had never revealed this before to anyone, not even Sylvia. Now it was as if it had to be said—he was in a dark confessional and the truth would cleanse his soul. "Sex has never been important to me. I'm not gay, don't get the wrong idea, I just don't care all that much about making love."

"I see." She didn't sound convinced.

"What I am is romantic. The part I go for is the companionship."

"That's the best part." She placed her head on the pillow beside his for a moment. But their breathing never fell into rhythm. Soon she said: "Good night," and left the room silently.

In the morning they sat at the kitchen table in pale sunlight eating muffins and drinking tea. Seebold was reminded of uncomfortable breakfasts with his landlady years ago when he was at the university, before he gave it up and settled for accountancy.

"Looks nice for my day off," she said, indicating the out-of-doors with an awkward movement of her head.

"Clouding up later I think I heard it said." She was inviting him to spend the day with her and all Seebold wanted was to get away.

"Will you walk home from here?"

"Yes. Up the hill to the Village. The white cottage on the corner of the High Street, facing the Common." He enjoyed flaunting Sylvia's house.

Fay had left the front door propped open when she brought in the milk. Now a tall young man came through and stood close to the kitchen table. He had inherited the same sort of head as his sister—shaped by a potter with a lot to learn—but his body was well proportioned. "Too late for breakfast?" He extended a hand to the older man who shook it, half rising.

"This is Martin Seebold. He got caught by the rain last night. My brother Reg. You've got a hell of a nerve showing your face around here this morning."

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"What's the matter?"

"You know damn well."

"I don't."

"Forty pounds taken out of my drawer last night. When I came home the place was in a shambles." She watched Reg's reaction as he turned and surveyed the sitting-room. "We put it back together."

Reg ambled into the other room. He opened the drawer where the knitting-magazines were kept, closed it, and walked back into the kitchen looking thoughtful. "Why do you think it was me?"

"Who else?"

"Last time I only took twenty. I borrowed it."

"The way they borrow from Barclay's Bank in the middle of the night."

"I'd never toss your place. You know me better than that."

"Unless you wanted me to think it was somebody else."

"I have an idea who did it." Reg made a helpless gesture. "Why don't you have a telephone like decent people?"

"Do you want coffee?"

"I have to go and see somebody."

"Have some coffee first."

"No, thanks. My sister thinks I robbed her."

Seebold walked up Wimbledon Hill to the Village. He began to feel better when he reached the top, the High Street shops aligned ahead of him with their pricey merchandise and well designed fronts. There was a physical difference between down the hill and up the hill, he was convinced of it. The air-pressure up here allowed his blood to flow more easily, or perhaps ozone from the trees in the Common was a tonic for his lungs. He always felt safer and happier up here—just as down in the town there was excitement, but danger among a different kind of people.

He let himself in, carried the morning mail upstairs to his office, and sat at his desk, looking out across the road at the giant chestnut tree and the pond in the middle distance. He still thought of this room as an office although he did not work here. When he took early retirement last year, Seebold had spoken in terms of doing a little freelance. But nobody had offered him any such work and he had not pursued it. His redundancy settlement had been generous and Sylvia's resources were considerable. All Seebold had to do was take it easy and grow as old as possible with maximum grace. The famous

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heart attack two years ago provided justification for a degree of idleness.

Seebold's head was nodding, his mind filled with images of Fay and Reg on rope-ladders scaling the side of a ship, when the telephone rang beside him. It was Sylvia calling from Newcastle.

"Where were you?"

"Where was I when?" After a long separation it took only this brief exchange to reestablish their relationship.

"I rang three times last night and twice earlier this morning. It is now eleven-fifteen."

"I wasn't here. I was playing gin with Lionel Henning. Then we watched the late film. When it started to rain I camped out on his settee."

"Oh yes."

"My neck feels as if it contains a hot poker."

"I suppose I believe you. With your medical history, I can't imagine you chasing the girls while your wife is away."

"Very funny."

"Promise me you won't end up dead in the bed of some teenaged tart."

"Even funnier."

She fell silent and Seebold occupied the time watching the ducks and coots on the pond. It interested him that a belligerent coot chased only other coots. Ducks, much of a size, were left alone.

"I rang to say I've decided to stay another few days."

"Having a good time, then?"

"Good time has nothing to do with it. I'm helping Gary and Rose, doing the things a mother does for her son and his wife. It happens to be more difficult at a distance of several hundred miles."

"I know."

"They could be living somewhere in London, if you were a normal father."

"I did nothing—"

"If you'd done nothing, Gary wouldn't have taken Rose this far away."

Seebold remembered the moment in Cannizaro Park when Gary came upon the two of them. On a Sunday afternoon, he had led Rose through a tunnel of rhododendrons to show her the view from his secret lookout. In tight jeans and cotton blouse, she was like a muscular young boy. Drugged by the droning afternoon and the waves of fragrant greenery breaking around them, he had put his arm

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around her slender waist and drawn her to him. Her chestnut head rested against his chest. Her hair smelled of shampoo. He had kissed the part in her hair.

"Fortunately," Sylvia was going on, "Gary has never told me what you were up to."

"There was nothing."

"So you say. But he and Rose live in Newcastle now, in a very ordinary little house. So don't talk to me about having a good time in Newcastle."

Seebold considered putting down the phone, pretending they had been cut off. But she would only get through again, more disturbed than ever. Like taking the cane, trousers down, gritting his teeth across the headmaster's desk, Seebold had to absorb his wife's telephone call.

"I'm putting an envelope of photographs in the post. Gary and Rose and the baby. When I get back, we'll decide which ones to have framed."

"So I'll see you when? Saturday?"

She laughed, and for just a second or two the buoyant sound made him feel secure. "Don't worry, I'll confirm my estimated time of arrival. Give you time to wash the perfume off the pillowcases."

Seebold put down the phone. Then he picked it up and dialed Lionel Henning. His old friend was ready to provide an alibi. "What have you been up to, naughty boy?"

"I'll explain when next I see you. An incredible story, full of moral significance. Never become involved with the common people. They'll drop you in it, plunge you straight down into the roaring fires of hell."

Seebold, after a lunch of cheese and granary bread and a shapely bosc pear, was napping on top of the bedspread when the doorbell chimed downstairs. The noise dragged him out of a half sleep in which he had been grinding his teeth. A casement window was open. Sunlight across the end of the bed warmed his feet and the fragrance of mock orange permeated the room.

The bell chimed again.

When he opened the door, Seebold did not recognize Fay Blore for a couple of seconds. She stood there enjoying his discomfiture. Her cheeks were burned from hours spent in the sun. She had put aside the trappings of premature middle-age to appear now in velvet slacks, open sandals, a stylish blouse, and a tiny scarf knotted at

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the neck. Her brown hair was pulled around and clipped at one side—an improvement—but starry pencilled eyelashes could not save the mismatched eyes.

"You were having a nap!"

"It's all right. Come in."

He sat her down in the living room under the sloping ceiling, the dark beams, all of it centuries old. She stared about her like a tourist in a museum. "I've come to take you out. I owe you from last night."

"You took a chance."

"You said your wife is away."

"A few more days. We were on the telephone a while ago."

"Did you tell her about me?"

"I told her I was out last night with my old friend Lionel. Playing gin rummy."

"Good old Lionel."

He brought the Waterford decanter to the Jacobean table and poured her a glass of Australian sherry. In crystal, it looked as Spanish as they come. He went upstairs and changed, shaving in five minutes. He pattered down the winding stairs like a schoolboy, smelling of lemon cologne.

Outside, she said: "I'll leave the choice to you—this is your territory. But remember, it's my treat."

Seebold wanted to get out of the neighborhood. A 93 bus was laboring up the hill in the distance. He guided her to the stop and they boarded the bus for Putney. "There's a lovely little place near the bridge," he said.

The giant proprietor was bellowing down the telephone in Italian. After five minutes, he presented himself to Seebold and took the order, repeating the word "Signor" after each item with mock obsequiousness. But the veal was tender and the sauce of lemon and white wine was delicious.

When they left the restaurant, there was still an hour's light in the sky. The tide was in, the grey water high against the embankment protecting the Lower Richmond Road. Seebold led Fay along the footpath towards the brick facade of The Star and Garter. They sat at a table by the window, watching cruise boats heading up to Teddington or down to Greenwich. Conversation was easy and once, when she lowered her head against his shoulder laughing at one of his jokes, he kissed the part in her hair.

Later, they caught a bus on the south end of the bridge. It was

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dark now. Talked out from the pub session, they traveled along the Parkside in silence, holding hands. Seebold had time to think. She must not come inside with him. Her presence in the house would last forever. Nor could he go home with her a second time. That way lay disaster.

As the bus approached the turn onto Wimbledon High Street, he got up and put a hand on her shoulder. "I'd better say goodnight."

She was so experienced at being rebuffed that she took it with an approving smile. "Keep in touch," she said as the bus stopped and he escaped onto the pavement.

Seebold took his time walking past the cenotaph, past the pond and the chestnut tree. Inside his iron gate, he studied the silhouette of the hydrangea. They looked as if they could use a drink. Tomorrow. He searched for the front-door lock, and before he could insert his key the door swung inward. He stood listening. After half a minute, he reached through and switched on the light. He noticed a mark on the doorframe where the jimmy had gone in.

The place had not been ransacked, but he was able to inventory the missing articles immediately. The carriage-clock from the mantel, several pieces of silver from the cabinet. Suddenly, as sure as death and tax-evasion, Seebold knew who had robbed his house. Reg Blore. While he was out for a couple of hours, escorted by the sister. For all Seebold knew, Fay was in on it.

The police. He had the telephone up, had dialed the first two nines, when he changed his mind. To cause trouble for Fay without giving her a chance to say something was not right. Instead, Seebold dialed a taxi number. The cab came and he had the driver take him down the hill to the Kingston Road and drop him a hundred yards from the fish-and-chip shop. Taking deep breaths, he walked down the laneway and climbed the iron steps. Below him, the crash and hiss of deep-frying on a massive scale went on, hidden beneath the glass roof.

Seebold knocked at Fay's door and stood waiting in the dark. If she was willing to get hold of Reg and make him return the stolen goods now, this night, he would forget the matter. Otherwise . . .

Fay was taking a long time coming to the door. He knocked again, sharply. A light went on somewhere inside, not in the sitting-room. He knocked a third time. Voices began whispering on the other side of the panel. Seebold began to feel unsure of himself. If Reg was in there and he wanted to make an issue of the accusation . . .

Another light came on and the door swung open. A girl Seebold

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had never seen stood to one side in jeans and bare feet and a pajama top. Behind her stood another stranger, a bleached-blond young man, also wearing tight jeans—bare-chested, tanned. These people, Seebold told himself, have climbed out of bed to open this door.

"I'm looking for Fay Blore."

"Hello. Come in. My name is Annie Wickersham." Her manner was airline-hostess-friendly but her voice was public school. "This is Bjorn Lindgren. We're friends of Fay's brother. She should be along soon."

He came inside and accepted Bjorn's handshake. The boy looked and sounded like middle-class money in Sweden. "I won't stay if Fay isn't going to be around."

Annie's self-assurance was overpowering. "Please sit down, Fay would want you to." She sat after he did and faced him with her hands draped languidly across her knees. "We used a key Reg gave us—with Fay's permission, of course. I expect she's stalling now to give us time."

Bjorn stood confidently, hands in pockets. All the pose needed was sand and sun. "We're just back from Greece," he said.

"Crete, actually," Annie confirmed. "I've been touring for the past six months—India, Nepal. I ended up in Crete, where I ran out of money. The only thing I could do was take work picking cucumbers and tomatoes." She stared at her roughened hands. "Then along came Bjorn and rescued me. Air fair home." The boy's hand hung close enough for her to take it and press it against her cheek.

Footsteps approached on the iron stairs. Seebold got to his feet. So did Annie Wickersham. "The wanderer returns," she said.

Fay tapped with one knuckle, opened the door, and allowed Reg to enter ahead of her. Seebold's presence stopped them in their tracks. "What are you doing here?"

"I have to talk to you. Alone."

"We're just on our way," Annie said. She took Bjorn by the hand and led him into the bedroom. They were back dressed and out the door before the tension had time to escalate.

When the front door closed and their footsteps began retreating down the iron stairs, Fay said: "Well?"

"My house was broken into this evening. While you and I were together."

"That's terrible. Did they take much?"

"A few valuables."

Reg said bluntly: "Why come here? Why tell us?"

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Seebold thought, Let the confrontation begin. "Because I think you did it."

"Me?"

"The coincidence is too much. I've never had robbers in my life. Last night I came here with Fay and her place had been ripped off. She said it was you. Tonight she and I went out—which you must have known—and somebody entered my house." Seebold was getting into a fine swing. "Too much!"

"You bastard. I was with friends. I never left—they'll vouch for that."

"I'm sure they will. Let them tell the police."

Reg made a move and Fay intercepted him. "Get out of here, Reg. I'm not having a fight in here."

"This old creep says I robbed his house."

"Go." She managed to open the door while restraining her brother. "Go home. There won't be any police."

When they were alone, Seebold, feeling easier now because he had done his job as a man, said: "I'm sorry, Fay, but you must see my point. It has to have been Reg."

"He has an alibi."

"Of course he has."

She tossed her shoulder bag onto the settee and turned to face him, not on his side at all. "Have you any idea how many break-ins there are in London? I saw some figures. Five hundred a day. Something like forty here in the borough. Your number came up."

"That's not how it feels to me."

"What have you got to go on besides your hunch?"

"He didn't leave his name on the wall—a hunch is all there is. But I know it was Reg, it had to be him."

"Then call the police."

"I don't want to."

"Well, what *do* you want, Martin? You're starting to drive me up the wall. I don't know why I bother with you."

She looked helpless, on the verge of tears. He kept his distance. "I want back the things he took. Tell him to return my stuff and that will be the end of it."

She watched him for a few seconds, then turned away. "I'm going to take a shower," she said as she left the room. "We'll talk after."

"I'm not going to hang around."

"Stay or don't stay. I'm having a shower."

He was still standing there as the drizzle of water began hitting

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a plastic curtain. His sense of outrage was mounting. He was being taken advantage of, right, left, and center. His house had been burgled, almost certainly by Reg, and Fay could not care less.

Seebold looked around the room. He would collect payment in kind. Something to hold against the return of his stolen goods. Not that there would be anything in this firetrap worth taking.

Then he saw it on a shelf near the bricked-up fireplace—a brass peppermill. It was obviously an antique, in need of a polish but a fine piece: cylindrical, ten inches high, with a jointed handle on top fitted with a wooden knob. The mill was in two sections. He tried separating them, but the joint was tight and he didn't want to damage it.

Feeling a mixture of terror and triumph, Seebold slipped the peppermill into his pocket, left Fay Blore's flat, and took a cab home.

As he placed the peppermill on the mantelpiece where the stolen carriage-clock used to sit, Seebold was feeling a sense of destiny. Fay's presence in his life was very different from tedious debits and credits that balanced at the end of the day. He had been let in on a mild form of anarchy. Truth be told, he was enjoying himself.

Pajama-clad, slumped in a wingback chair, his slippered feet propped on a needlepoint hassock, Seebold sipped a drink. It would be a bad thing, he realized, to bring in the police and implicate Reg Blore. If they made a case of it, Seebold would end up on the witness stand explaining how he happened to know Reg and, more to the point, his sister Fay. Sylvia would ask questions and his comfortable life here in the cottage on the High Street might be threatened.

The telephone rang. Seebold put out a hand and took up the receiver. Speak of the devil . . . but it was not Sylvia.

"I was thinking about you while I took my shower. You've had nothing but grief from me."

Her voice on the phone was magic. Seebold closed his eyes and curled up inside himself like a boy being told a bedtime story. "Not to worry."

"I do worry. I'd like us to start again."

"Listen. I've decided you're right about my robbery. It could have been anybody. I'll bring in the police tomorrow just so there'll be a report for the insurance. But I won't mention Reg."

"That's sweet, I'll tell him. He and Annie are here now. Bjorn's coming soon with Chinese food."

He listened to background sounds in Fay's apartment—plates,

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glasses, muffled words—the tribe back from hunting, safe for the night. He felt left out. "By the way," he boasted, "I took your brass peppermill. To make up for the stuff I lost."

"Peppermill?"

"It looks good on my mantel. Of course, if my things turn up, I'll discuss giving it back."

"I didn't even notice it was gone." She sounded anxious. "It belongs to Bjorn. He brought it back from Greece."

"Fine taste, these Swedes."

"He wants to sell it to a dealer. He only left it here for safe-keeping."

"There's no such thing as a safe place any more."

"Bjorn will be upset."

"You can tell him I'm chairman of that club."

Seebold did not sleep well. Lying cheek down, he could feel each beat of his heart. How much longer would the old pump carry on? And why was he not more afraid? Was this final section of his life such a bore that he could anticipate the end with no more interest than he felt during the credits of a bad television film?

He heard a thump below. His eyes opened, focused on the green clock-dial. Almost four o'clock—he must have been sleeping, after all. More noise downstairs. The front door juddered open and hit the wall. Then silence. He knew who was down there.

Quickly he rose and found his robe. He pulled his arms through the sleeves as he crept downstairs, past the bend and into the darkened living room. His hand found the switch and turned on the overhead light.

Annie Wickersham was at the mantelpiece, the peppermill in both hands. Reg was at the door, close enough for Seebold to touch him—or be touched. He felt no fear. It was as if he was father and had come upon the children engaged in some naughty prank. He moved to the girl, his hand extended.

"Where's Bjorn?" he asked. "Does he always use you to do his dirty work?"

"He's outside in the car," Annie said. Obediently, she handed Seebold the peppermill.

"Annie," Reg groaned, "don't give him that."

She reached for the peppermill. Seebold fended her off. They grappled. She was beefy under the blouse, nothing soft about her. He was enjoying her weight against him, but he was falling off balance.

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The fire irons went over with a crash and, as he sank to the floor, Seebold saw fit to raise his voice in a ferocious cry.

Reg's eyes were wild. "Come on, let's *go!*" He moved back into the doorway.

When Annie followed, Seebold flung the peppermill at her back as hard as he could. It missed her, struck the doorframe, and fell to the floor in two pieces. Reg bent and retrieved the pieces in an odd, scooping motion. Then he was gone. Moments later, car doors slammed, an engine revved and retreated into the distance.

Seebold lay still. Strange, he thought, how his heart could hold up through this kind of stress. Had the doctors been wrong? Or had he experienced some sort of remission? The vital organ seemed, apparently, to be mending itself.

A forgotten episode from his childhood entered Seebold's mind. Seven years old, he stood on the school stage in front of an audience of parents. A female schoolmate faced him, holding two pieces of a heart made of red paper. To a piano accompaniment, she sang: "Are you a tinker?"

"That am I," the young Seebold sang in response.

"Can you mend my heart . . . ?"

"I'll try," he volunteered.

Focusing on the open doorway, Seebold could see white powder on the carpet where the halves of the peppermill had fallen. He crawled over and stared at the powder. In television dramas about drug-trafficking, a police officer—a narc?—would dip his finger into the powder, taste it, and know what sort of dope he was dealing with.

But Martin Seebold would not have known what taste to expect. And, anyway, he was afraid to try.

In the morning, a pair of policemen came around. Seebold allowed last night's forced entry to account for his loss from earlier in the day. He listed what had been taken, with estimated values. He didn't refer to Reg or Annie or Bjorn. The officers went away, bored as tourists.

Jaundiced thoughts, like dregs of stale wine, collected in Seebold's mind as he shaved. But he felt better when he left the house and walked down the hill to visit his friend Lionel Henning. They lunched on Henning's patio, then went inside for a game of gin rummy. Seebold lost two quid. He was concentrating less on the cards and more on his recounting of the Fay Blore saga. It was all

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fine, self-deprecating stuff—her glamorous voice, her appearance as a dowdy dwarf, that hat which must have been her mother's . . .

There was a film he wanted to see at the Odeon down the Broadway, so he went there alone at three o'clock and sat in the dark, filling his mouth with chocolate-coated caramels while admiring the way Jack Nicholson attacked a door with an axe.

The pubs were open when the film let out, so he wandered back to the Alex for a couple of drinks while he read the paper. Then up the hill for a light supper, an hour watching the box, and early bed.

Nobody broke in that night. The telephone did not ring. In the morning, the postman dropped a large brown envelope through the slot. Seebold opened it and found, protected by squares of shirt cardboard, several beautiful photographs of his son Gary, his wife, and the cherubic grandson. A handwritten note was folded between the photos.

Back at the kitchen table, Seebold sipped apple joice and read the familiar script. Sylvia would be back on Monday. He was not to come all the way to King's Cross. She would ring when the train arrived, then she would take the District Line to Wimbledon. Seebold could time himself to meet her there and help with bags and a taxi.

His holiday was coming to an end. Too soon, the bad old routine would begin again. It was difficult for him to pin down just what was bad about his existence here with Sylvia. Never mind, he felt grim and justification was not required.

The day was sunny again, no mention of rain in the forecast. Seebold took out the hose and watered the plants in the back garden. Then he went up to the flat roof outside his study. The potted marigolds lining the eaves looked tired. He scooped water from the rain barrel and gave them a drink.

Next he unfolded a deck chair and reclined facing the sun. After an hour, his face felt crisp so he took himself inside. The last thing he wanted was to get himself fried.

He would have to see Fay one more time before Sylvia came back. This idea occurred to Seebold at four in the afternoon as he was working a crossword puzzle. It made sense for him to let the girl know that, as of Monday, she must not ring up or appear at the cottage for any reason.

He put on the expensive maroon corduroy trousers Sylvia had bought for him a year ago when she thought he ought to try dressing young. He slipped his feet into black patent-leather loafers and drew

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over his head a white knitted shirt with a tiny gold crown on the pocket. Seebold decided to consider himself a well preserved man heading out to keep some mysterious appointment.

With a bottle of claret wrapped in a Harrod's plastic bag, he set out down the hill. He was anxious to arrive at Fay's place, to see her, even to run into the three kids again. He missed them all—the room, Fay's loud music, the whole atmosphere of their young lives. They were so far behind him on the road, it seemed a sensible thing for him to go back and meet them.

He was in the lane, approaching the iron stairs, when it occurred to him she might not be home. If there was no response when he knocked at the door, he would simply wander away, find a pub, have a couple, and come back.

The door was ajar when he reached the iron landing. Fay's door seemed to spend more time open than shut. Voices murmured within. His rap brought Reg to the doorway. "Fay, come here," he said as if Seebold was an exhibit. "Look at this."

She appeared at her brother's side wearing a flowered shift, barefoot, her eyes wide and bright. "Martin! How lovely, we're having a celebration."

He allowed her to lead him into the dusky room. Bjorn was lying on the settee, a clear place beside him where Fay must have been. He was pinching the stub of a thin cigarette. Annie Wickersham lay on the carpet, her head on a pillow. Reg went to her and lay down. He took the cigarette she offered and drew on it deeply.

"What's the occasion?" Seebold asked, his confidence ebbing.

"We're celebrating a deal," Annie said. "An arrangement."

Bjorn spoke up. "Annie flies to Greece. Annie flies back. With her good clothes and accent, Annie flies through customs."

"Then everybody gets high," Reg said and they all laughed for a long time.

Finally Seebold said: "I brought some wine."

Fay left the settee and came to receive the bottle. As she took it, she put a wrist around his neck, drew his head down, and applied a wet kiss to his lips.

With a glass of wine in his stomach and a second one in his hand, Seebold's personal pendulum took an upward swing. He sat with his legs extended, shoes making a glittering V. "So this is how you lot enjoy yourselves," he commented, a tolerant judge.

"One of the ways," Bjorn said.

"How do I love thee?" Annie recited. "Let me count the ways."

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"You can't count that high," Reg said.

Seebold felt an urge to get closer to the life they led, to show some sophistication: "By the way," he said, "what was that white powder that ended up on my carpet the other night when the peppermill came apart?"

The response was silence. Bjorn sat up and put his feet on the floor. He looked from Seebold to Reg to Annie. "What the hell happened in there? You never told me."

"He threw the mill," Reg said. "It broke apart."

"How much is lost? That stuff sells by the gram."

"Hardly anything," Annie whispered.

Bjorn climbed to his feet. "And this bugger knows?"

Fay came in from the kitchen. "It's all right," she said.

"It *isn't* all right! This guy can do us if he feels like it."

"I don't feel like doing anybody," Seebold said. "Except maybe Fay if the rest of you would disappear."

Fay took Bjorn's arm and turned him. She moved him towards the door. "Go to the off-licence, love. I feel like another nice bottle of wine."

Bjorn was trying to turn back. "We've got to do something about this guy."

"We'll talk when you come back. Reg, go with Bjorn. You know the wine I like."

When the young men were gone, Fay came to Seebold. "You'd better go. He can be terrible when he gets mad."

"I don't want to go," Seebold said.

"She's right," Annie said. "Bjorn goes crazy. In Crete, in the greenhouse, a man got on his nerves. Bjorn cut him with a trowel. He would have killed him."

"All right." Seebold moved away from the door. There was wine in his glass. "May I finish this?"

"Quickly, please."

He took his time drinking the wine while Fay stood in the center of the room and Annie went to look out the window. Setting down the empty glass, he said: "Okay if I go to the bathroom?"

"Hurry, for God's sake."

He took his time and when he came out, Annie said: "They'll be here any minute."

The door was open. Fay propelled him through and stood, wanting to close it. "I'll ring you."

"You can't ring me after Monday."

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"All right, tomorrow. Go now."

They heard the clang of heavy steps on the iron stairs. Fay said something Seebold missed and Annie made a moaning noise in her throat. Bjorn appeared first, Reg behind him carrying the supplies.

"What's this?" Bjorn faced Seebold.

"Going home."

"To ring the police?"

"No, I just want to go home." Now, when he could have used courage to bluff his way out in front of the women, Seebold was swamped with fear. This young man could thump him nine ways. He took a breath and felt his heart miss a beat, stutter, and catch up.

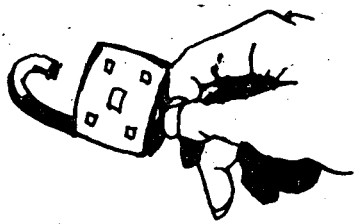
"You're not going anywhere," Bjorn said. "Not till I make sure about you."

As Seebold made a move to pass the young Swede, Bjorn grappled with him. The weakness in Seebold's arms was ridiculous. For heaven's sake, he could lift a filing cabinet if he had to. He struggled to break free and Bjorn threw a punch he managed to avoid.

Fay called: "Let him go!" but she remained in the doorway. Annie was a face behind the curtains. Seebold managed to get loose and tried again to pass Bjorn on the railing side. Bjorn caught him by the shoulder, swung him around with his back to the railing, and aimed another punch. This one landed, driving Seebold against the railing which gave way, letting him step back into space.

He heard Fay's scream as he fell. The glass roof of the restaurant kitchen shattered and Seebold burst through into heat and light, seeing white tile, stainless-steel shelves, red floor, startled upturned faces. Life *does* end unexpectedly, he realized. There *is* a hell and we descend into it literally.

And for Seebold hell was a cauldron of cooking oil heated to a temperature of almost 400 degrees.



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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME BEAT

by R. E. PORTER

CRIME FICTION UPDATE: Since its original publication in 1979, perhaps no reference book in my library has been so frequently consulted as Allen J. Hubin's Edgar-winning *Bibliography of Crime Fiction 1749–1975*. The good news this month is that Hubin has enlarged and updated this indispensable volume, making it even more valuable. The new edition is titled *Crime Fiction 1749–1980* (Garland Publishing, $75.00).

The book not only contains an author and title index to every volume of mystery and crime fiction published in the English language, but also has several new features added since the first edition. The index of series characters has been augmented by a series-character chronology listing year of first appearance, type of character, country, number of books, and the author. Especially valuable for readers and librarians is a settings index, listing many of the books by the country, city, region, institution, or time period in which they are set. The author index often includes brief biographical information, or else a listing of standard reference books in which the biography of a given author appears.

One can browse these 712 pages daily and find new treasures each time. The result of Hubin's massive task of reading and research is certainly the most valuable single reference book on mystery and crime fiction.

MYSTERY MAKERS: Southern Illinois University Press has launched its Mystery Makers series with two especially handsome and well designed volumes, *Exeunt Murderers: The Best Mystery Stories of Anthony Boucher* and *Buffet for Unwelcome Guests: The Best Short Mysteries of Christianna Brand*. Both volumes are edited by Francis M. Nevins, Jr., and Martin H. Greenberg. The Boucher volume contains 22 stories (one previously unpublished) plus an Introduction and checklist by Nevins. The Brand volume has 16 short stories (two new to American readers), with Introduction and checklist by Robert E. Briney. Both books are priced at $16.95.

MYSTERIOUS PRESS: The ex-

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panded Mysterious Press plans to publish 20 new titles during 1984, including an unpublished novel by the late James M. Cain and a collaborative novel by John Lutz and Bill Pronzini titled *The Eye*. In the fall they'll publish *The Eyes Have It*, edited by Robert J. Randisi. It's the first anthology by members of the Private Eye Writers of America, and contains 15 new stories written especially for the book. Bookstore distribution is being handled by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

MURDER GAMES: Computer and videodisc wizardry have invaded the mystery field with a batch of new interactive murder games in which players direct the course of action, interview suspects, search for clues, and attempt to solve the crime. Infocom (55 Wheeler St., Cambridge, MA 02138) produces computer programs titled *Deadline* and *Witness*, selling for between $50.00 and $60.00. Vidmax Video Company is marketing laser video discs *(Many Roads to Murder* and other titles) priced at $39.95.

MORE SINISTER SUNDAYS: Mystery fans in the New York area should know that Bogie's Restaurant (249 West 26th Street) is well into its third season of Sinister Sundays, featuring old mystery movies on the third Sunday of each month and a prominent mystery writer to speak and sign books on another Sunday of the month. Lucy Freeman will be the guest author on January 29, and the program gets under way at 8:00 P.M.

CREASEY CRIME COLLECTION: St. Martin's Press has published *John Creasey's Crime Collection 1983*, the annual anthology of the Crime Writers' Association, edited by Herbert Harris. Six of the 15 stories appeared in *EQMM* and five others are new, including fine tales by Antonia Fraser and Peter Godfrey. The price is $12.95.

COMING ATTRACTIONS: Brian Garfield, current president of the Mystery Writers of America, has written his first suspense novel in four years, *Necessity*, which will be published this spring by Richard Marek/St. Martin's Press. At about the same time, Walker will publish his anthology of favorite stories chosen by past MWA presidents, *The Crime of My Life*. Garfield's 1973 novel, *Tripwire*, is being produced as an NBC-TV movie.

British mystery expert Melvyn Barnes is writing a full-length study of Dick Francis for publication in Ungar's "Recognitions" series late this year.

Ralph B. Sipper is editing a collection of Ross Macdonald's letters for publication by Knopf. And Matthew J. Bruccoli's biography of Macdonald will be published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich in March.

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"Q"

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

It is astonishing to reflect how many actors have portrayed Ellery Queen on the screen, and how often the detective has solved cases in movies and on television across the decades. Indeed, there have been more Queen adventures made expressly for television than even Sherlock Holmes episodes. Interestingly, too, the very first time that Ellery appeared on a motion-picture screen, it was in a film that presented him almost to perfection.

The Spanish Cape Mystery was released in 1935, the same year as the mildly sensational book on which it was based. In the novel, the murder victim is discovered on a beach, his nude body covered with a cape, but in the movie version the corpse is more modestly wearing bathing trunks. Republic, the newly formed studio releasing the film, was to achieve a reputation for action-adventure thrillers, and a cerebral whodunit such as this would seem far from their style. But they manfully tackled the material, cast an Ellery that was both dashing and intelligent—a young stage actor, Donald Cook—and turned out an adaptation that could hold its own beside any Queen film further down the road.

Ellery has just the right touch of elitist erudition (Cook was to play on stage in Noel Coward's *Private Lives*)—as well as romantic playfulness in dealing with suspect Helen Twelvetrees ("Mr. Queen, you have the oddest way of mixing romance and murder."). Just to demonstrate his prowess, the amateur detective solves a little curtain-raiser mystery for his police-inspector father at the beginning of the film (when a valuable jewel disappears from a store) and shows us the disarming psychological advantages of asking for a cigarette light—a trick to mark him as a thinking-man's sleuth.

Then it's off for a month's holiday at the Spanish Cape coastal area of California, "batching it" with an older friend, gruff Judge Macklin, who is certain, unhappily, that "if we went anyplace, they'd put on a crime wave for your benefit"—and, for sure, almost upon arrival they encounter kidnaping and murder at the estate up from their beach cottage. Ellery is in his element once again.

Halfway through the investigation, a redneck sheriff disparagingly calls Ellery "Philo," reminding us all of the detective's partial literary ancestry—but there is little of Vance's superior posing here, despite Cook's clear upperclassmanship. This Ellery—while more absorbed, methodical, and thoughtful than any other—is still brash, charming, witty, aggressive, and almost noble, magnanimously allowing the hostile sheriff

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to take credit for solving the case.

Unfortunately, two years later Republic attempted to bring *The Chinese Orange Mystery* to the screen, retitling it *The Mandarin Mystery* and casting Eddie Quillan as Ellery. Quillan had made a career of playing cocky young streetwise heroes, and his only similarity to Ellery Queen was sharing the same initials. Alas, the potentials of this intricate mystery—which begins with the discovery of a corpse with all its clothes on backwards—were beyond both the actor and the script.

In the next years, a weekly Ellery Queen radio program, written by Fred Dannay and Manfred Lee, made the scholarly, probing detective with his "Challenge to the Listener" familiar to a large audience. In 1940, another, smaller studio, Columbia, released *Ellery Queen, Master Detective,* giving the title role to Ralph Bellamy, who up until then had played the non-threatening "other man" in several romantic comedies. Bellamy's touches of appealing shyness made him a very acceptable Ellery, and the mild love interest created for the radio show—the strident Nikki Porter, a woman who invades the detective's life, hoping to become a mystery writer—is carried over into the film. Ellery and Nikki investigate through seven movies and, while their association seems happy, Ellery is always being led by the nose. When, after the fourth film, Bellamy is replaced by a scrappier William Gargan, the detective becomes somewhat less docile. The mysteries themselves, mainly original, seem cramped and perfunctory.

In 1972, a French version of *Ten Days' Wonder* managed to leave Ellery out entirely. But by that time a score of actors had portrayed the detective on both radio and television, more than played any other literary sleuth in these mediums. The boyish Jim Hutton of the Levinson and Link TV series is best remembered today, but it is valuable to look back at the varied personalities of earlier, forgotten Elleries—surely among the most intriguing and complex figures in the annals of sleuthing.

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INTERVIEW: DOROTHY SALISBURY DAVIS (2)

This is the conclusion of an interview that began in the previous issue.

EQMN: Your short story, "Born Killer," had its roots in your parents' move to a farm in Wisconsin when you were five years old. You've described the move as your father's dream and your mother's nightmare.

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DAVIS: My mother was a solitary melancholic woman, at least from when I remember her. She said that she had changed after a severe illness—erysipelas—when I was three. I can remember her face swathed in bandages. She pined for Ireland, having left it at 27, but she never went back.

My father was her opposite in many ways. Born in Dorset, England, he was brought to the U.S. at the age of seven. He lied about his age and served in the Spanish American War and the Philippine Insurrection. He was an officer in World War I—loved the Army, loved to be with people. A convert to the Catholic Church, he was far more religious than my mother, in whom the Jansenist streak was very strong. He also loved the farm. My mother loathed it. She loved the city. I have loved both—even as I loved both parents separately.

EQMN: Could you go into that a little more?

DAVIS: I was a tomboy with my father—and I'd have to say in my early days he won the perpetual struggle between them for my allegiance. He was an excellent marksman. We had three guns in the house—his service revolver, his Army rifle, and a shotgun. He kept them in fine condition, but he would not hunt. If it became necessary on the farm he would shoot a fox or a weasel which was raiding the chicken coop, or the crows that ravaged the cornfields, but the guns were protective weapons.

I used to will myself to waken at five in the morning so that I could sneak out of the house after him and help him with the chores. The morning mists always reminded my father of the Philippines, and some of his best stories were told as we went out to bring the cows in from far pastures for milking. I remember going out with him one morning to search for a cow that had not come in with the rest of the herd. She had dropped a calf during the night. My father carried the calf home in his arms, the cow and I following behind, both of us, I suspect, adoring him

EQMN: What are some of your other memories of the farm?

DAVIS: I rode every animal with four legs and a back, and I'd have ridden a gander, I think, if he hadn't pinched my buttocks blue. I milked cows at seven and drove a tractor at ten. All the while my mother wanted to raise a little lady. Only when I reached adolescence and the convent schools was I ready to abandon the farm life. But by then it was the Great Depression so that I *had* to work outdoors—*and* in, for my mother was ill much of the time.

I lived with a certain amount of self-revulsion, feeling that I was taking the smell of the barnyard to school with me. But let me not overemphasize that. As my father, I too loved people. I was much too gregarious, and too mischievous, and I loved school too much to care how I smelled.

In many ways I had to educate my mother—but they were minor ways. She loved the music I came to love, the books, and she took me to more movies than most children ever heard of, for they were her

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solace. She wasn't the usual movie fan, she simply loved drama—and therefore the character actors. —My detectives just don't come out heroes, they're generally straight men for a lot of character actors.

In the end, it was my mother—that reclusive woman—who stepped out and bargained for the scholarship that would send me to college. My father felt I should get an office job, although he, too, came round.

EQMN: Your first Christmas on the farm you and your mother, you've said, trimmed the tree you and she had cut down on the farm with pictures cut out of the Sears Roebuck catalogue. Whose idea was that?

DAVIS: My mother's. Her imagination enriched my childhood—and her language with its depth of Irish folk lore. When I was hopeless, she'd say: "My heart's scalded with you." Let me give you a few more, though they're imbedded in my work. To the question, What's for supper?: "Sweeps' heels and roasted snow." —"It'd melt the heart of a wheelbarrow." —"Happy as a goat a-hanging." Her tales were all as bleak, but when she did laugh, and it was rarely, her laughter would lift the roof. No one ever left the house that she didn't watch out of sight from the window.

EQMN: How old were you when you discovered you were adopted?

DAVIS: At seventeen I discovered I was an adopted child while doing a chore for my adoptive father at the bank. The floor tilted half over and then settled into place again. It was more than a year later that I told my parents I knew. Grief and joy. Beyond that I don't especially want to comment. There is some small information available to me under the changed laws, but while I often say I will someday get the court order that will open the records in Springfield, Illinois, I've not done it.

EQMN: How did you land your first job as an advance promoter for Keystone the Magician?

DAVIS: Fresh from the Sacred Heart nuns, and my father recently remarried, I struck out for distance in 1938. I packed everything I owned into a '29 Chevy and drove to Columbus, Ohio—from Lake Forest, Illinois—to the home of my best friend. Their neighbor had Keystone the Magician on the road, and I got a job promoting the show in towns of ten to thirty thousand population, one a week, through the Northeast and Midwest.

It lasted for over a year because every time I got close enough to home to quit, the producer jumped me five hundred miles in the opposite direction. Lonely as an owl and often hungry, I found in every human contact a little of the ecstasy of first love. I won't ever forget the old lady who wept when I was leaving town after a week of our getting to know each other. —*The Clay Hand* came out of it. Or the gal with the broken arm I'd given a ride to singing "The Old Rugged Cross'" while I changed a flat tire by the moonlight in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

EQMN: You worked as a librarian for a time. Mysteries certainly figure high in library sales. Were

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they popular at the library where you worked?

DAVIS: I worked only briefly in a public library, but it was during the Golden Age of the mystery and they were very popular. As a special librarian in a meat-packing company, I found the biggest mystery was why I was there. —Actually, I knew. I needed the job and it was a good one.

EQMN: Your mother would probably have loved your marrying an actor. Your husband, the actor Harry Davis, was the one, you've said, who insisted you become a writer. How did you meet?

DAVIS: We met on a blind date when he came to Chicago with the Broadway company of *Jacobowski and the Colonel*. The press agent wished to compensate me for a small favor I had done her, so she prevailed upon two members of the company to go out with us on her expense account: those supporting players were Harry Davis and E. G. Marshall.

My father lived to read *A Gentle Murderer*. I wish my mother had lived to know I became a writer. I don't think it would have surprised her. She used to say of me, "She hasn't a lazy bone in her body." It's probably true. In my head—that might be something else. No, but I do sometimes flee to the garden and dig—rather than think.

EQMN: That you get out and walk the mean streets yourself is obvious in your work. Do you think it shows when a writer doesn't, or can't, do this?

DAVIS: I feel it's beginning to show in my own work that I no longer have the intimate access to those mean streets (which I somehow favor) that I once had. I think I feel safer on them than most people in my guise would, but it's hard to convince Harry that I'm safe there.

It depends on the writer, whether he or she needs to walk the streets: there was Proust and there was Zola. There was Sayers and there was the Greene of *Brighton Rock*—my all-time favorite crime story, by the way.

EQMN: You've said that your politics went leftish early on, but not all the way, and that to this day you can put up a pretty good argument for individualism. Are you a political activist?

DAVIS: Yes. I suppose I expressed those feelings best in a Memorial Day talk I gave at our local flagpole a couple of years ago.

EQMN: Could we quote from it?

DAVIS: Why not? . . . "I've demonstrated for peace—where once I might have demonstrated for victory. And today I would speak for disarmament over preparedness. But I know that the right to do so choose has been assured me by the deaths of brave men who fought that America become and forever remain a country of choices. The right to dissent carries with it, I think, an obligation to understand those from whom one differs. In a society such as ours, there is possible an arrogance of dissent as well as of power. Because we have presumably thought our way to dissent we are in danger of thinking those with whom we differ unthinking."

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THE JURY BOX

by ALLEN J. HUBIN

The conventional wisdom in general publishing has been that mystery short-story collections don't sell. This for the most part has left the field to specialty publishers, some of whom have done very well with it. Despite their efforts, however, a treasury of worthy tales still awaits the enterprising publisher. Recognizing this, Southern Illinois University Press and editors Francis M. Nevins, Jr. and Martin H. Greenberg launch Mystery Makers, a series collecting the best mystery stories of important authors.

The first is *Exeunt Murderers* by Anthony Boucher ($16.95). Boucher (1911–1968), primarily known and beloved as a mystery-fiction commentator and critic, also wrote seven novels and over 30 short stories in our genre. This excellent collection contains 23 stories, including one written and sold in the 1940s but never before published. Here at last are the eight Nick Noble tales, the two about Sister Ursula, and non-series adventures well set in their time and place and nicely demonstrating the joys of fictional murder.

The second Mystery Makers collection is *Buffet for Unwelcome Guests* ($16.95) by Christianna Brand. Anyone familiar with her early detective novels, securely cast in the classic mold, will find these 16 stories to be surprisingly offbeat nuggets of crime and character. True, her Inspector Cockrill appears in four stories, but here, too, the emphasis is on the wry and unexpected, the narratives approach their subjects from fresh directions. Altogether an impressive and emphatic book.

But more offbeat still are the latest additions to the vast Sherlockian pastichery, the five tales about Inspector Mantis comprising *Trouble in Bugland* by William Kotzwinkle (Godine, $12.95). In this affectionate tribute to Holmes, all characters are bugs, from the Inspector, who preys on sinister insect criminals, to his assistant, Doctor Hopper, to his police rival, Captain Flatfootfly, to his friend, Walking Stick. Mantis' cases are varied: a butterfly who rides bareback (on fireflies) in the circus is kidnaped; a booklouse eats encoded state secrets; a sacred caterpillar head is stolen from Termite City; a headless monster terrorizes a rural area; and the crown of the King of Bugland disappears. These are inventive stories, lavishly illustrated by Joe Servello.

The newest novel-length pastiche is *Time for Sherlock Holmes* by David Dvorkin (Dodd, Mead, $14.95). This science-fictional adventure starts slowly, creaking and unpersuasive. But persevere: in the end, it outruns its weaknesses and flows with no little power and

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ingenuity. Holmes and Watson live on agelessly, thanks to a secret elixir. So does Moriarty, but quite differently—in a stolen and malfunctioning time machine, oscillating backward and forward through time with murderous assaults on national leaders at the end of each cycle. From 1925 to 2170 we travel, as Holmes pursues his eternal foe, on earth, satellite, and Mars.

The charm and humor of Charlotte MacLeod's series about Professor Peter Shandy and Balaclava Agricultural College in Massachusetts are zestfully evident in the fourth novel, *Something the Cat Dragged In* (Doubleday, $11.95). Someone dispatches with finality a repellent old professor, who with a selection of leading citizens was a member of the reclusive Balaclavian Society.

At the same time, political turmoil, attended by possible scandal, descends on the college. Shandy—who knows his Agatha Christie—to the rescue.

David Smith, Vice-Dean of the Harvard Law School, spent 18 months as a legal advisor in Africa, where he has quite ably set both his mysteries featuring lawyer James Stevens. The second is *Timbuktu* (Dodd, Mead, $15.95), which reunites Stevens with Nigerian judge Muntaka and Sister Monique, a missionary for whom Stevens has a chaste longing. The affair has to do with slave trade, ivory smuggling, ancient manuscript, gold, and murder. The telling is light-hearted, the people and cultures well caught. A polished and enjoyable tale.

Who Stole Stonehenge? (St. Martin's, $11.95) is the second of Leela Cutter's novels about English mystery writer-sleuth Lettie Winterbottom. It's a wholly preposterous affair, with the narrative beginning in an advanced state of confusion. Despite this, the patient reader, receptive to parody, will find a certain attraction in all the foolishness. Somebody *has* stolen Stonehenge, all the megatons of ancient rock, arousing the natives, the police, and, curiously enough, the military. A reporter, one Hilsebeck, is on the scene opportunely and determines, with the help of Lettie, to win the huge reward offered for the return of England's largest timepiece.

Murder Isn't Enough (Walker, $12.95), featuring a New York reporter as an engagingly incompetent sleuth, is the welcome debut of New York newsman, Don Flynn. Ed Fitzgerald inherits the court beat on the death of a colleague. Said death has several curious features, but the cops call it an accident. Ed prowls around, semi-wrongheadedly asking questions, showing a sketch of the presumed killer. This produces further corpses, attempts on his life, and continued disinterest in the original death. By this time, Fitzgerald is in terminal trouble with almost everyone, particularly his boss and the D.A. I expect Ed will be back.

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"We've decided to kill Martin," Carla said, trying to cheer herself up. "Everyone in the office is going to strike a blow. . . Do we count on you or not . . .?"

PROJECT MUSHROOM

by JULIE SMITH

It was June 29th, the day before the end of the fiscal year, and Carla looked awful. She was trying to cheer herself up with a puny little joke. "We've decided to kill Martin," she said. "Everyone in the office is going to strike a blow, like in that Agatha Christie novel. Do we count you in or not?"

I shook my head. "I guess I haven't been here long enough. I'm nowhere close to murder."

"Just wait. He gets to everybody."

In fact, I'd been on Project Mushroom only about a week. The project's purpose was to figure out ways to increase California's mushroom sales income by several zillion bucks. It was funded by the State and administered by the State Department of Food and Agriculture, and if it wanted to continue being funded it had to deliver a mountain of reports to Food and Ag by June 30th. Its director was Martin Larson, who did more to block advances in mushroom agriculture than anyone the Twentieth Century has yet produced.

The project was inspired by the current fancy-cooking fad. Some State Assemblyman noticed that dried morels cost more than three hundred dollars a pound and no one could keep them in stock. He thought that if California could figure out a cheap way to grow morels and other fancy fungi, the state would get richer. A lot of people thought that was ridiculous. I thought it was a good idea. I'm a botanist and the author of a children's book on mushrooms and I live in a tiny town in the San Joaquin Valley, about twenty miles from the tiny Valley town that housed Project Mushroom. Because of those three facts, Betty Castro, the head geneticist on the project, recruited me.

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Betty reasoned that if I could write, I could edit, and she didn't think the project stood a chance of getting refunded unless someone translated the required mountain of reports into English before they were sent to Sacramento. Martin insisted on writing them all himself, and he wrote only in bureaucratese. So I joined the project to save it. One of the conditions of my employment was that I deal directly with Carla, the education director, and not with Martin.

Poor Carla got darker and darker circles under her eyes as the end of June drew nearer. The day she unveiled the joke murder plan I was in the office to pick up the last paper, planning to take it home to work on it. "Where," I asked her, "is the report on 'Options for Improving California's Mushroom Resources?' "

"Martin hasn't started it yet."

I began to see what she meant about the way he got to *everybody*. He phoned me at ten o'clock that night. "I don't think I'll be finished till very late. I'll put the report under your doormat, okay? It's got to be on a bus for Sacramento by two o'clock tomorrow and I've got to go over your edit and then we've got to have it typed. Do you think you could have it back to me by ten-thirty?"

I sighed. "I'll shoot for eleven."

It would mean getting up at 4:00 A.M., but so what? It would all be over a few hours after that and I could be back in bed by noon, with a check under my pillow that would pay the rent for the next three months.

The report was about fifty pages long, and apparently the work of the Cleveland Wrecking Company. By 9:30, I still had fifteen pages to go. I called Martin: "Come over and start looking at the part I've done. If you have questions, I'll be right here."

He didn't come over. He sent someone to pick up the report and take it back to his office—about a twenty-minute drive. But I couldn't worry about that. I was starting to panic. The last five pages were gibberish. They needed a complete rewrite, but I couldn't do it until I knew what Martin was trying to say. I would have to go in to the office and work with him—each page would have to be handed to the typist as we finished it.

I left at 10:30, forty-five minutes behind the messenger. Martin had gone through only about ten or twelve pages of my edit. Frantic last-minute activity whirred about him, but he seemed oblivious to the approaching deadline. He was sitting in his private office, utterly relaxed, agonizing happily over each comma. I'd never been in his office before. It was decorated with dried mushrooms, mounted and

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framed. At that moment, I'd love to have fed him his own big, loathsome specimen of *Amanita phalloides,* the most poisonous toadstool that grows in California.

He put down his pencil and gave me his full attention. He answered my questions slowly and deliberately, fully and completely—and then some. I was sweating with impatience by the time we'd finished.

I started the rewrite and he worked on the rest of my edit, interrupting me now and then. I answered as shortly as I could, but somehow he managed to work in a few questions about my background and whether I'd be available for future jobs—questions I really couldn't ignore without being horribly rude. And I didn't want to be rude, but it was getting on toward noon—we had only two hours to get the report on the bus. The typist came in, grabbed a sheaf of papers, and left. Carla came in in a panic. She had a bunch of color samples with her, in shades of mushroom tan, mushroom gray, and mushroom gray-green. "Martin," she said, "the man from the bindery is here. Pick the color for the cover—quick."

"Oops. Stop the presses," he said. "A lifetime decision." He began to pore over the samples. I resumed typing. Carla left.

"Katherine, what do you think?" He spread about twenty samples out in front of me. I picked a soft gray-green.

"I don't think so," he said. "I think this tan." He held it up.

"Great," I said.

"No. I'm not sure. I'm going to ask Bill." Bill was the art director.

He left to find Bill and I thankfully went back to the rewrite.

Martin came back in a few minutes, fingering a gray sample. "This is the one Bill likes. He thinks the black type'll look best on it. What do you think?"

"Take Bill's advice—it's what you're paying him for."

"The trouble with the world today is that everybody listens to the experts."

I shrugged and kept typing, trying not to think about the chunk of tax money that was paying for Bill, and me, and other unlistened-to "experts" on Project Mushroom.

Carla came back in: "Martin, how about it? The guy from the bindery's getting impatient."

"Just a second, Carla. This is important."

Carla disappeared. Martin continued to stare at the samples. Finally, he picked another gray—at least it must have been another gray since it was on a different sample card. But it looked for all

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the world like the one Bill had picked. Martin covered it with a sample of black type, then put the sample on the gray Bill had picked. Sure enough, it showed up better on Bill's gray. Martin pointed to his own gray. "I think this is a much richer color, don't you?"

"I hardly see any difference at all." This time I couldn't keep the curtness out of my voice.

"I know what I'll do. I'll ask Betty." Martin picked up the phone and spoke to Betty: "Get your fanny in here. We've got a problem."

I kept typing. In a second, Betty whirled in, hair flying, arms full of papers, face frantic. "What's the problem?"

Martin explained—slowly. Betty told him to listen to Bill.

When she had left, Martin stared at the color cards some more. Finally, he stood up. "I'm going to have to flip a coin," he said. "Tails, we go with Bill's choice. Heads, we go with mine."

He flipped a quarter onto my typing table. It was tails.

"That's it," I said. "Go with Bill's gray."

"This is important, Katherine. It's got to be right."

"So go with your gray."

"I'm not sure. I'm just not sure."

He sat down and stared at the samples some more. Carla came in, red-faced: "Martin, for heaven's sake. We're paying this guy by the minute."

I guess she meant the man from the bindery. I didn't ask. Martin went out with her, and came back in about ten minutes, just as I was pulling the final page of the rewrite out of the typewriter. "We went with one of the tan ones."

"I'm sure it'll look very nice. Can you look this over? There's about fifteen minutes to get it read and typed."

Carla rushed in again. "We've got five typists standing by. Any pages yet?"

Martin waved her away. "Katherine," he said, "after this is over, could you give me some pointers on improving my writing style?"

"Sure. Tomorrow maybe."

"My main problem is I have so much to say, you know? I don't want any of those guys at Food and Ag to miss anything. I think if we just—"

In my head, a clock ticked away. "Oh, dear!" I put my hand to my mouth. "I've just forgotten something. Martin, can you excuse me a second?"

I ran from the room and ducked into Carla's office. I picked up

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the phone and started dialing numbers at random, trying to look busy in case Martin followed me and tried to finish his sentence. I called my mother, my sister, and my boy friend, who was on a business trip in New York.

Finally, I saw Martin burst out of his office, waving the rewrite pages. He raced over to the head typist's desk and said, "Type like the wind." He was smiling, clearly having the time of his life. The other four typists each rushed over and took a page. They typed like the wind. Carla stood by, playing with a set of keys, ready to race the finished report to the bindery.

I went to lunch with Betty. Two beers and a ham sandwich later I felt nearly normal again. I came back to the office with her to get directions to Bill's house, where a Project Mushroom New Fiscal Year Party was going to take place in a few hours. Betty was explaining how to get there when Carla came in, streaming tears: "I missed the bus."

Martin put an arm around her. "No big deal. I called Food and Ag yesterday—they gave us a day's grace."

Carla shoved him away and clomped out of the room, not looking at Martin, Betty, or me, simply getting out of the room quick. Martin apparently didn't notice. He turned to me: "Katherine, I went through your edit pretty quickly. I think we're going to have to do a few things over."

So I didn't go to the New Fiscal Year Party after all. I stayed home and worked. I'd been looking forward to the party, too. It was a potluck dinner, and everything on the menu had mushrooms in it. There were stuffed mushrooms for hors d'oeuvres and then mushroom soup and marinated mushrooms and mushroom crepes. Dessert was a cake in the shape of a mushroom.

I worked until 1:00 A.M. and then I took my edit of Martin's rewrite of my rewrite over to the project office and pushed it through the mail slot as arranged. After that, I went home, took the phone off the hook, and slept. I slept through most of the next day, getting up late in the afternoon to eat and read a little. Then I went back to bed and slept all night.

The headline in the next day's paper was PROJECT MUSHROOM DIRECTOR DIES OF MUSHROOM POISONING. The story told about the New Fiscal Year Party, and what had been on the menu, and said that Martin had been poisoned by an *Amanita phalloides*. No one else had been stricken. No one could explain how the *phal-*

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loides had gotten into any of the dishes, as only domesticated mushrooms had been used.

It was a Saturday, so I knew no one would be at Project Mushroom. I went over and got the guard to let me in by saying I'd left a book in the office. Then I went into Martin's private office. His mushroom collection was still intact, except for the framed *phalloides*. Another specimen, an *Amanita muscaria,* had been hung in its place. I called Carla and told her the *phalloides* was missing. "What *phalloides?*" she said. "Martin never had a *phalloides* specimen."

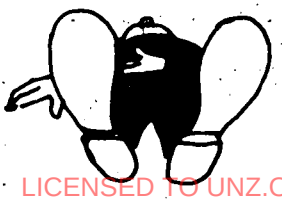
I called Betty. She'd never seen the *phalloides,* either. Then I called Bill. Neither had he. Neither had the head typist.

So I decided not to mention the missing *phalloides* to the police. I didn't want to look like a crazy lady.

But if Martin's death was an accident, the news media pointed out, that meant it must be possible to buy a *phalloides* accidentally at the grocery store. They also questioned the need for anything called Project Mushroom in the first place, and went on quite a bit about frivolous programs that were using up tax money.

So far as I know, there was only the most cursory investigation of Martin's death. The police seemed to think it was surprising that only Martin had been stricken, but practically everyone on the staff was a mushroom expert and none of them thought it odd, so the cops went away cowed. Project Mushroom was not refunded.

I have no idea how those people did it. If I had to, I'd put my money on the crepes, which had to be made individually, but I wouldn't rule out the soup or even the marinated mushrooms—a single portion of either could have been easily doctored. I also don't know if they all participated, or if one or two of them did it and the rest simply kept quiet about the missing specimen. All I know is that Martin Larson did more to block advances in mushroom agriculture than anyone the Twentieth Century has yet produced. In California, anyway.



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a *NEW* Hal Johnson story by

JAMES HOLDING

The bank robbers had made off with roughly three and a half million dollars' worth of cash, securities, jewelry, antiques, coin collections, and whatnot from two hundred safe-deposit boxes. Within the week Lieutenant Jake Waslyck, Head of Robbery Detail, was on the phone to Hal Johnson at his desk at the Central Library . . .

THE BOOK CLUE

by JAMES HOLDING

It wasn't one of your ordinary hit-and-run, in-and-out bank robberies.

It was, in fact, a real work of art, a model from which any earnest young apprentice in the bank-robbing trade could have learned plenty.

It took place over the frigid New Year's weekend—a three-day holiday, since New Year's Day fell on Saturday—so the thieves had three full days and nights to knock a hole through the rear wall of the bank, disarm the bank's elaborate alarm system, cut open the vault with acetylene torches, and rifle two hundred private safe-deposit boxes of their contents.

Later, when the owners of the stolen valuables came to the bank and reported the extent of their losses, the bank estimated that the thieves had made off with roughly three and a half million dollars' worth of cash, securities, jewelry, antiques, coin collections, and whatnot.

Not a bad haul for three days' work—especially since the looters made a clean getaway, leaving behind them, aside from the shambles of empty deposit boxes and a hole in the wall, only a few traces of

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their three-day visit. A small pile of rubble from the shattered wall. A thin film of plaster dust on the floor of the bank inside the hole, marked with hundreds of indecipherable footprints. Scattered crumbs of crackers and cheese and some coffee splashes on the vault floor. The crusts of several peanut-butter sandwiches on the vault custodian's desk. And nothing else. Except for embarrassed bankers, puzzled policemen, and rueful insurance adjusters.

About noon on the fourth of January, I was at my desk at the Central Library working on my next overdue-list, when the girl on the switchboard rang through and said a police officer wanted to talk to me.

"Lieutenant Randall?" I asked. Randall was Chief of Homicide and had been my boss for five years before I joined the Public Library staff.

"No, Hal. Somebody named Waslyck."

Waslyck, Head of the Robbery Detail. Jake Waslyck. Sure, I remembered him from the old days. "Put him on," I said.

"Hal?" His voice came through like gravel on a tin roof. "How you doing, Hal?

"Can't complain, Jake. You?"

"I can complain," he said. "Plenty."

"The First Federal Bank job, right? I read about it in the papers."

"Who didn't? I want to ask a favor of you, Hal."

"Any time," I said. "What?"

"I need advice. Can you stop in here or shall I come out there?"

"I'll be downtown this afternoon. I'll stop by headquarters. Advice about what?"

"One of your library books. See you about three?"

"Two-thirty would suit me better."

"See you then."

At two-thirty, I was in Jake's office. The place is cramped, smells strongly of stale cigar smoke, and is furnished in police-station modern: a battered steel desk, worn linoleum on the floor, a scratched filing cabinet in one corner, an old-fashioned hatrack in another, two uncomfortable straightback chairs, and a grimy venetian blind over the unwashed window.

Jake sat behind his desk, his squat body overflowing his chair, his bulgy eyes red and puffy. His bushy ginger mustache was badly in need of trimming. And he didn't seem to have any neck at all.

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Same old Jake. He looked a lot like an oversized bullfrog crouching there. But I remembered there was nothing wrong with his brain.

I sat down gingerly in one of his straight chairs. It trembled under my weight as I reached across the desk to shake hands. I said, not entirely sincerely, "Nice to see you again, Jake. It's been a while."

In a frog's croak of a voice he said, "Thanks for coming in, Hal." He paused.

"You look shot," I said. "The First Federal job getting to you?"

He nodded. "We got nothing to go on. ID's still comparing fingerprints, trying to find some that aren't those of safe-deposit-box holders or bank custodians. Absolutely no luck so far."

"It's probably hopeless," I said sympathetically. "It was below zero that weekend. They needed gloves, for the cold if nothing else."

"Yeah. So we got zilch. No leads. No suspects. We're going around in circles on a three-million-dollar robbery!" He cleared his throat. "It's a hell of a feeling, believe me."

"Frustration," I said. "I know what you mean, Jake. I've been there."

"So that's why I called you. I'm clutching at straws."

"Like the library book you mentioned?"

He gave one sharp nod, up and down.

"Tell me about it."

"It's a book we found in our search of the bank vault after the heist. You know those little booths where they let you gloat over your treasures in private?"

"Yeah."

"Well, we found this book from your library under the table in one of those booths."

"And you think it's a *clue,* maybe?" I underlined the "clue" with my voice. Cops hate the word.

"Not really. But a million-to-one chance. See, we figured, considering where the book was found and all, that some box-holder had left it in the booth by mistake when he stopped in last week to count his fortune or whatever."

"Doesn't the vault custodian always come in afterward and check out the booth to see you haven't left anything behind? Mine always does."

Jake said, deadpan, "You mean *you* rent a safe-deposit box?"

"Sure. But not at First Federal, thank God."

"What do you keep in it?" He was needling me.

"I skim a little off the top of the fines I collect."

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"That must come to—let's see, maybe forty cents a week?"

"In a good week," I said. We both laughed. My laugh had a little edge in it, I'm afraid. "You're saying that a vault custodian might not notice a library book under a booth table?"

"It's possible. Those guards are only checking the booth to see if you've left a thousand shares of IBM or something like that lying around."

"So?"

"So last night when I couldn't sleep, it suddenly occurred to me that the library book just possibly might be something the *thieves* took into the vault when they broke in."

"You mean so they'd have something to read during coffee breaks?" The idea tickled me.

"Why not? They're in there for three days and nights, remember. They bring in cheese and crackers, thermoses of hot coffee, sandwiches—we even found some bits of fabric the lab says could be from a sleeping-bag lining. So why not something to read during their rest periods? Maybe one of them is a book nut. You know, queer for books."

"It's a long shot," I said, grinning. "But possible, I suppose. Let's see the book."

Jake yelled "Josie!" at the top of his voice and a minute later Detective Second-Class Josie Evans came into his office from the squad room across the hall. I remembered Josie from old times, too. She's black, slender, and very attractive in her navy-blue skirt and white blouse. To look at her you'd never guess she can toss a two-hundred-pound man over her shoulder without even mussing her hair.

She recognized me. "Hi, Hal," she said.

I said, "Hi, Josie. What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?"

"Defending my virtue most of the time," she answered tartly. "What is it, Jake?"

"Bring me the library book we found in the bank vault. He turned to me. "Josie's a book nut, too. She's reading the damn thing."

"I've finished it," Josie said. "It's a swell story." She went out and returned shortly with it. After she left I said to Jake, "You think this book may be evidence in the biggest bank robbery this state ever had, and you're letting Josie *read* it, for God's sake?"

"Relax, Hal. Relax. The book's been put through the works by the lab already and gives us nothing. Except about two hundred sets of

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smudged latents from former readers. That's why I asked you to come in. Maybe you can get more from it than we can."

I picked up the book. "It's from our Central Library."

"I can read, Hal. I saw the stamp."

"There's no return card in the pocket."

"I noticed that, too."

I grinned at him. "And furthermore," I said, not averse to needling *him* a little, "It's a hell of a good yarn, like Josie said." The book was a popular novel by Wilbur Smith called *The Eye of the Tiger*. "It takes place in Africa," I said, "just like the old-time goodies by Rider Haggard."

Waslyck grunted. "Can you find out who borrowed the book from the library?"

"Sure. Name, address, and library-card number. Simple. Our computer coughs that stuff up on demand. But—" I held up a hand as he started to speak"—wait a minute, Jake." Another small jab of the needle wouldn't hurt, I thought. I had it on good authority that Jake Waslyck was one of my many former colleagues in the police department who had been known to refer to me slightingly as Library Fuzz Hal, the sissy ex-homicide cop who now spent his time tracking down library books instead of murderers—and although this was perfectly true, I didn't like them patronizing me. My work's a lot quieter than theirs, it pays just as well, and I can sleep better at night. So I said, "Our computer coughs up what you want only if the book happens to be overdue."

"Why the hell's that?"

"Invasion of privacy," I said. "Until a book is overdue, it legally belongs to the borrower. Our library is a *public* library. It's none of our business who has a book until it goes overdue. Then it belongs to us again."

Waslyck swore. "Listen, this is an official request from a police officer—a *public servant*—for the name and address of a suspect who may have been involved in the commission of a major felony." He glared at me.

I smiled. "In that case, our computer might be conned into making an exception. You see, Jake, we have this nifty secret code to bypass our computer's compunctions about breaking the privacy laws. We feed in the first three letters of the author's name—his last name—then we feed in the middle two digits of the book's Zebra patch number. Then comes the middle initial of the city's current Democratic mayor—"

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"Knock it off, Hal. This is serious. Can you get me the information I want?"

"I'll try." I stood up. "I'll have to take the book with me, okay?"

He made a dismissing gesture.

I took the book and left.

I called him back within half an hour. "I've got it," I said. "The book *is* overdue. You ready?"

"Shoot."

"The address is 1221 Bookbinders Lane."

He wrote it down. "What's the name?"

"You won't like this, Jake. The name is Adelaide Westover."

Jake swore. "A woman!"

"Seems like it," I said. "I'm sorry. It kind of blows your theory, doesn't it?"

"Not necessarily," said Jake, but his disappointment was evident in his tone. "I've heard of woman bank robbers before. Like Clyde's lady friend, Bonnie."

Trying to cheer him up, I said, "This Adelaide Westover may have wanted to spend the long weekend with *her* boyfriend, so she went along with him on the bank job and curled up with a good book while he worked."

Waslyck ignored that. After a moment's silence, he said, "I think we'll give it a whirl anyway, Hal. We might get lucky."

Ten minutes later, my phone rang and it was Jake Waslyck. He said harshly, "You sure that's the name and address your computer came up with?"

"Sure I'm sure."

"Then your computer has a slipped disk. There's no such street as Bookbinders Lane in this city or any of its suburbs. And there's no such person as Adelaide Westover listed in the City Directory or the phonebook."

I sighed. "Then the book was borrowed on a phony card, Jake—a card issued to a fictitious person at a fictitious address. Sometimes people lie about their names and addresses when they apply for a library card and show us fake references. We can't check up on every citizen who applies for a card. But it doesn't happen often."

"I thought it was your job to prevent that sort of thing."

"It is. I'll see what I can do about this. If I come up with anything, I'll let you know, Jake . . ."

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Four days later I telephoned Waslyck. It was around five o'clock in the afternoon and he'd gone off duty. I called him at home.

His wife answered the phone. "Hello?" she said in a rich creamy contralto that made me wonder how she ever came to marry a cop with a voice like a bullfrog.

"I'd like to speak to Jake if he's there," I said.

"Who's calling?"

"Hal Johnson from the public library."

"Hold on."

"Hi," he said when he came on the line.

I said, "I think I've got something for you on that library book, Jake. It's complicated for the telephone. I better see you."

"Okay. Be in my office at noon tomorrow."

"Right," I said. I hung up, feeling unappreciated and put upon.

I was in his office at noon, sitting on the same shaky chair. Jake greeted me with a short question.

"What you got?"

"Well, our library thief might possibly—just possibly—have something to do with your problem. I think I'm onto his real identity. But I'm not sure. I need *your* advice this time."

Waslyck sat back in his creaking swivel chair. "Make it short. Okay?"

I said, "I questioned all the check-out people at Central Library about Adelaide Westover. Did anybody remember anybody checking out a book called *The Eye of the Tiger* by Wilbur Smith on a card made out in that name on that date—it didn't have to be a woman. Nobody remembered anything."

"Figures," said Jake.

"So then I thought, what if this Adelaide Westover, whoever she really is, borrowed other books by Wilbur Smith with her phony library card? Your library card is good," I explained parenthetically, "at any of our branches. And you can return borrowed books to any branch you want to. Did you know that, Jake?"

"To my shame, I didn't." Jake tapped his fingers impatiently on his desk.

"Well, I checked out all our Wilbur Smith titles, both at Central and all our branches—no easy job, since Smith has had six or eight successful books published in this country and some of our branches have as many as six copies of each one circulating. Thank God for our computer."

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Jake said an unpleasant word.

I went on blithely, "Which is how I found out that three other Smith titles have gone overdue—although not long enough overdue to have been brought to my attention just yet."

Jake was following me closely now. "And the three overdue Smith books were checked out to Adelaide Westover?" he guessed.

"No, only one of them. A book called *The Delta Decision*. The other two titles—*A Sparrow Falls* and *Hungry As the Sea*—were checked out at our North Side and East Gate branches by two different people entirely. The book from North Side branch was checked out to Alexander Warfield, 15101 Quarto Avenue, the book from East Gate was checked out to Alan Woolfolk, who supposedly resides at 6225 Doubleday Drive."

"But doesn't?"

"But doesn't. Nor does any Alexander Warfield reside at 15101 Quarto Avenue. There are no such people and no such addresses in the city."

"More phony library cards?"

"Seems like."

Jake mulled it over for a few seconds. "And you figure the three phony library patrons are one and the same person? Because they all borrowed Smith's books?"

I nodded. "Sometimes people borrow a book by an author they've never tried before and they like it so well they want to read all the other books the author has written."

"And this joker who uses fake library cards has gone ape over Wilbur Smith."

I shrugged. "Could be. If the three phony names and addresses are the same person."

"You think they are?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Why?"

"Look at the names." I passed him my notebook. "Look at the addresses."

"The names have the same initials—Adelaide Westover, Alexander Warfield, Alan Woolfolk."

"Right. And as I remember my homicide work, a lot of people use their own initials when they're dreaming up an alias."

"Are you saying your book borrower's real initials are A.W.?"

"It seems reasonable."

"I'll buy that. But what about the addresses?"

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"All three street names have something to do with books. The kind of phony names a guy who likes books might come up with. Bookbinders Lane. Quarto Avenue. Doubleday Drive."

"Okay. So what's the phony's real name then?" Waslyck leaned forward in his chair.

"Don't you want to hear how I nosed him out?" I asked innocently.

"No, I don't. But you're going to tell me anyway."

"All three phony library cards were issued at our South Side branch," I said. "That narrowed things down. But naturally nobody at South Side remembered anything about issuing them, so I pulled the application files of all the library volunteers who work at South Side and are authorized by our librarian to issue new library cards. Did you know we have twenty-seven volunteers working an average of four hours a week without pay at the South Side branch?"

"I know it now."

"So after examining the applications of volunteers over the past few years at South Side, I talked with the librarian and her assistant—and came up with a really hot-looking suspect for you."

"Who?" asked Jake.

"A volunteer named Arthur West. Sixty-nine years old, authority to issue new library cards, ready access to the check-out and check-in machines, considered a compulsive reader by his associates. He works twelve hours a week at our South Side branch without pay, has a pleasant personality, a minuscule income from Social Security, and a negligible pension from his former employers."

Waslyck interrupted. "But what's this Arthur West got to do with the First Federal Bank job?"

"That's what I wanted to ask your advice about," I said. "He's got a small checking account at First Federal, for one thing."

"So have hundreds of other people."

"Our South Side branch is right next door to the bank."

That got me nothing but a blank look.

"Arthur West often brings his lunch to the library in a paper bag—and the lunch invariably consists of peanut-butter sandwiches."

"Half the people in the world eat peanut-butter sandwiches for lunch," Jake said wearily.

"But Arthur West doesn't eat his crusts," I said. "Just like one of your bank robbers."

"The world's full of people who don't eat their crusts."

"True, Lieutenant," I said, "but the world's *not* full of library

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volunteers whose names begin with the letters A and W, who are peanut-butter-sandwich fiends who don't eat their crusts, who are living on inadequate incomes and who—" I paused for dramatic effect "—were employed before their retirement by the Universal Security Company of Chicago, whose specialty is the manufacture and installation of sophisticated alarm systems for banks."

Waslyck acted as though a bomb had exploded under his chair. He shot to his feet. "Why the hell didn't you tell me that in the first place? Where can I find this Arthur West? You *do* know *his* address, I take it?"

"He lives in a rented room over The Corner Cupboard Bar and Grill out in Lake Point. You know The Corner Cupboard, Lieutenant?"

"Who doesn't? It's a dive. Some very hard characters hang out there."

"Well, that's where Arthur West does his beer-drinking and eats most of his dinners," I said. "And maybe it's where he recruited his help for the bank job."

Waslyck yelled for Josie. When she showed up in the doorway, he said, "Get your coat on and check out a car for us—I'll meet you down in the garage." He took his own overcoat off the hatrack in the corner. The thermometer was still flirting with zero outside.

I said, "Aren't you going to get a search warrant before you go out there? You want to keep things legal, don't you?"

Jake gave me an exasperated look. "You know something, Hal?" he asked. "I'm really glad you don't work here any more." He turned for the door. "So now get lost, will you? I'll let you know how this turns out."

The morning newspaper next day told me all I needed to know—under a front-page headline. The police, the story went, acting on a tip from an informer, had arrested an elderly man named Arthur West in The Corner Cupboard Bar and Grill the previous afternoon and charged him with complicity in the sensational robbery, ten days ago, of First Federal Bank on the South Side. According to police Lieutenant Jacob Waslyck, other arrests were imminent. A search of West's rented room above the bar led to the recovery of almost a third of the loot stolen from First Federal's safe-deposit vault. The stolen valuables had been found hidden in a sleeping bag under West's daybed. The police reported that West's room

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also contained seven hundred and forty-two books bearing the identification stamp and card pockets of books from the Public Library.

That last item, I knew, was a direct message from Lieutenant Waslyck to me. His way of saying thanks—or a malicious reminder that I wasn't any better at my job than he was at his.

I found a message on my desk when I got to the library that morning. Dr. Forbes, the Library Director, wanted to see me in his office right away. His spacious office is right next to my cubbyhole. He could have yelled for me and usually does. But this morning the message was formal. Dr. Forbes must be upset. And I thought I knew why.

He looked at me over the newspaper he was reading. Before he could say anything, I blurted out, "Dr. Forbes, I know what you're thinking and I don't blame you. But that newspaper article didn't mention two important facts. One, that Arthur West, the bank robber and library-book thief, is also a trusted volunteer who works at our South Side branch. And two, the informant who tipped off the police to him was me."

His expression went from stormy to partly cloudy. "Tell me about it, Hal," he said.

I told him everything. When I finished, his expression had gone from partly cloudy to fair and warmer. He said, "No wonder we didn't realize the books were missing. West checked them out to himself on spurious cards, and before they were overdue he checked the cards back in again without actually returning the books."

"Exactly. We were lucky he forgot to check those Smith titles in before they showed overdue on our computer."

"Why do you suppose he forgot to do it?"

"Maybe he was too busy planning the bank robbery—or more likely, after over seven hundred book thefts he began to think his system was foolproof and we'd never get onto him. He got careless."

Dr. Forbes smiled.

"So am I fired, or not?" I ventured to ask him.

"Not," he said.

Two weeks went by. Two weeks during which I carried out my duties as usual. Two weeks during which Arthur West plea-bargained himself down to a charge of petty book theft in return for naming his accomplices in the bank robbery and agreeing to testify against them when their trials came up. Two weeks during which

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said accomplices—an apprentice plumber and a backhoe operator, both local citizens and regular patrons of The Corner Cupboard Bar and Grill—were duly charged with bank robbery. Two weeks during which, to everyone's relief, the other two-thirds of the missing loot was recovered almost intact, the plumber's share from a beat-up suitcase in a locker at the Greyhound Bus Station, the backhoe man's share zipped into one of his wife's drip-dry pillow-covers and stashed in the crawl space between his garage ceiling and roof.

On Saturday night of the second week I took Ellen Thomas out to dinner at Jimmy's Crab House. Ellen is the girl who holds down the check-out desk at the Central Library. She has promised to marry me as soon as we can acquire an adequate nest egg to see us through any rainy days in the future.

We were facing each other across a narrow table in a booth. Ellen looked at the prices on the menu and said, "Are you out of your mind, Hal? This place is too fancy for us."

I said, "I'm going to have Maine lobster, myself."

"Maine lobster?" She hesitated. "If you say so." Another pause. "Me, too."

The waiter took our orders and in due course brought in the lobsters. They were delicious. Not worth the price, but delicious. Between bites, Ellen said,

"What's the occasion, Hal? It is one, isn't it?" She gave me her up-from-under keen look.

"Yeah," I said, "a celebration of sorts."

"What sort? A celebration of what?"

"Wait till dessert," I said. "I want to surprise you."

"Okay. I'll wait." She worked on her lobster for a bit. Then she said, "I can't wait any longer, Hal. Tell me now. Why are we blowing a week's wages at this elegant restaurant?"

"Because," I replied, "the First Federal and their insurance people got together and decided to give the Police Benevolent Fund and Hal Johnson from the Public Library a small reward in recognition of their services in solving the robbery and recovering their loot."

"Hey!" cried Ellen, her eyes shining. "My hero! How much?"

"Ten thousand for the PBF, ten thousand for me."

She was stunned. She stared at me, her eyes wide with outrage. "Ten thousand dollars," she said indignantly. "Ten thousand dollars for saving them three and a half million!"

I agreed. "But ten thousand is better than nothing."

She brightened.

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"It's pretty wonderful when you think about it. We've got our nest egg in one fell swoop. Now we can get married."

I said, "On ten thousand dollars? You call that a nest egg? It's hardly enough for a decent honeymoon. Not nearly enough to pay the obstetrician for the sixteen children we're going to have. Think of the college tuition for only one of the sixteen." I shook my head. "No way, Ellen. Suppose I lose my job or you lose yours? Suppose one of us has to spend a couple of weeks in a hospital sometime? Or we get divorced and I have to pay alimony and child support? Where would the money come from?"

Ellen leaned across the table and gave me a buttery kiss. "Well," she said, "we could always rob a bank, couldn't we?"

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION (Required by 39 U.S.C. 3685)

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KATHY TULLY-CESTARO
CIRCULATION MANAGER, SUBSCRIPTIONS

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a *NEW* short story by

KATHRYN GOTTLIEB

Bianca had her dearest wish—to be a suburban housewife. She also had a purple—pardon us, mauve—Cadillac, diamonds, the works. All her husband Ferdie demanded of her was that she live quietly. Very quietly. That did not include active participation in the Haynesville Elementary School PTA.

An adorably lethal story from Kathryn Gottlieb, who has always been wonderful on the subjects of real estate and male-female relationships . . .

PACKAGE DEAL

by KATHRYN GOTTLIEB

Ferdie and Bianca LaFrance were quarreling, as usual, about the PTA. Mrs. LaFrance was a member, a very active one, and Mr. LaFrance didn't want her to be a member at all.

The LaFrances had moved into the former Foglett mansion the previous year. The Foglett house had belonged to the oldest and most prominent family in Haynesville, and it was only after the youngest Foglett, himself in his sixties, had been obliged to take up residence in a Home, due to an overconsumption of inferior Scotch, that the house had come onto the market—where it had remained for some time until Ferdie LaFrance had come along and satisfied his wife's dearest wish, to be a suburban housewife, by purchasing the old estate with, it was said, a fistful of cash.

The house was a handsome one and, Mr. LaFrance was fond of repeating to his wife, she should have been content just to live there and never mind getting mixed up with the PTA. It was a large brick structure, set high on a hill, with a wide flagstone terrace across its front, a balustrade, and roses. In front of the terrace, and the roses,

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a driveway curled around in a circle before beginning a long plunge to Foglett Road some distance below.

Bianca LaFrance's unfortunate involvement with the PTA, so troublesome to her husband, had begun one day when, out for a stroll with her Pekinese, Mr. Yapimoto, she happened to pass by the scene of the PTA fair, then being set up on the lawn of Haynesville Elementary School. Strolling back to the house, she and Mr. Yap dropped in, Bianca offered her services, and in no time at all she found herself in charge of the trinkets table. And subsequently, painting shelves for the new school library—and in general making herself very useful. Again it seemed no time at all before she was proposed as vice-president of the school PTA, a position she happily accepted.

Her husband's objection to this worthy activity was that it involved Bianca with an Organization, and that meant strangers in the house, and even pictures in the paper. Ferdie explained patiently to the unheeding Bianca that publicity might have a blighting effect on his career, which was very important to him.

Finally, one day in May—a real spring beauty—Mr. LaFrance laid down his ultimatum. "Look," he said. "We'll go over it once more. O.K.?" He was a handsome young man, with black hair straight as an Indian's, and at times an impressive scowl. He was scowling.

"All right." Bianca sighed, ran a hand through her mop of golden hair, and pointed her pretty profile away from him. "Except it's not going to make any difference."

"It better," said her husband. With an air of suffering patience, he began. "Look. Are you listening?" Bianca nodded, rolling her blue eyes.

"I'm *listening*."

"All right. You've got the biggest house in town. O.K.? You've got a purple Cadillac—"

"Mauve." She pronounced it, with a smirk, "Moo-ahv."

"A purple Cadillac. Diamonds. The works. But you are going to live *quietly*."

"The PTA is quiet."

"The hell it is. I know outfits like that. First thing, you'll be wanting the ladies in for a cup of tea and they'll be sniffing around the house like bird dogs and looking in your bureau drawers. And how do you know who they are?"

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"They're members of the PTA."

"That's what they call themselves. But maybe some of them are something besides that. O.K.? Then, first thing, the world is reading about you in the local paper. Mrs. Ferdie LaFrance entertains the PTA. Etc. Etc. Pictures. They'll want pictures. There'll be cameras here."

"So?"

"So?" Ferdie rolled his eyes ceilingward. *"So?* She says *so?"* He released the ceiling and glared at his beautiful wife, slamming his fist on the desk. *"So?"*

"So what are they going to find? White powder in the piano legs? Ferdie? Is that what the ladies are going to do? Unscrew the piano legs?"

Ferdie had begun to breathe heavily. "I hope you're being funny. And I don't want to hear you talking like that." He glanced around the room. "How do you know the place isn't wired? Listen, Bi, I don't like the way you're talking to me lately. I want you out of that bunch, and now. You're not going on with it, and that's that. Get it? I'm warning you. You live quietly, or else."

Bianca swung half circle on her four-inch heels and marched to the door, where she paused long enough to say, "Honestly, Ferdie, sometimes I wonder about you."

"I'm warning you," he said again, very quietly, and sounding so sad that for a moment she was very much alarmed. "Look, Ferdie," she said pleadingly, "I've got to have friends. I'm lonesome. I really am. I'm *lonesome.*"

"You've got *me,*" said Ferdie LaFrance.

A short time passed. Ferdie was adamant, Bianca unbudging. One week. Two. Then came Memorial Day, and Ferdie summoned Bianca into the cozy room with genuine upholstery he called his study. He looked at his watch. "It's twenty minutes to eleven."

Bianca shrugged. "O.K., Ferdie, if you say so, it's twenty minutes to eleven."

"I'm giving you one last chance," said Ferdie. "You've got twenty minutes. Say it after me: 'I will never go to another PTA meeting. I will do what my husband Ferdinand LaFrance tells me to do.' That is all."

"No."

Her husband sighed. "What a shame. A pretty young girl like you. You actually mean you'd rather—"

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"Rather what?"

"Um. Rather not give it up?"

She nodded, staring at him. Something odd had happened to his expression. He no longer looked enraged, or even angry. The temperature of his eyes seemed to have dropped: they were looking at her as if she were a piece of furniture destined for the Goodwill Mission.

Bianca put her hand to her throat. "I need air," she said. She hurried out of the room, slamming the door behind her, walked rapidly across the width of the drawing room, where the sunlight bounced in little glints off the arms of the gilt-finished chairs and the soaring top of the white enameled grand piano, strode through the french doors at the far side of the room and out onto the broad terrace overlooking the rose garden. A rotund little man who had been gazing out over the flowers turned around and smiled at her. He had a round face, a rosebud mouth, and merry shoe-button eyes. Menace surrounded him in an invisible cloud.

She stood very still. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I'm Mr. Smith. Here, let me give you my card." He commenced to dig through his pockets. "I have an appointment with your husband for eleven o'clock. I'm afraid I'm early. Ah! Here we are."

Bianca looked at the card in bewilderment. "What's Total Services?"

"That's my firm," he said happily.

"But what do you do?"

"What it says on the card."

"Total services. What kind of services?"

He nodded his head rapidly as though agreeing with something she had said. "Total! We total your car, or any object you have in mind. Our rates vary. Also men, women, husbands, wives—whatever gets in the way of your happiness."

"What are you doing here? You're not planning to burn the house down, are you?"

"Oh, my, no. Just a small business matter. Kind of a social call. I happened to meet your husband one time, up in Montreal, or maybe it was Anchorage, Alaska. Fine fella. Or maybe I shouldn't say that?"

There was a pause. Mr. Smith went on, in a soft voice. "You're an unhappy woman, Mrs. LaFrance."

"Where'd you get that information?"

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"Part of Total's Market Reach-Out Research. One of the best in the business."

"Um."

Mr. Smith's voice took on a persuasive tone. "I can give you a good price. In fact, due to certain circumstances, a very good price."

"What circumstances?"

"Er, we expect to be working in the neighborhood next week."

Bianca sighed and shook her head. "I'm afraid I could never do anything like that. Anyway, I'd have to think about it."

The man with the shoebutton eyes said, "I'm afraid we can't do that."

"Do what?"

"Think about it. As far as we're concerned, once the matter is discussed you've got a contract with us. Gentlemen's agreement."

"But we haven't discussed it! I never said!"

"Implied consent, Mrs. LaFrance. You didn't say no. Now," he said in a brisker tone, "we'll want twenty-two thousand and forty dollars, cash in advance."

She looked at him with narrowed eyes. "That's exactly what I've got in my Christmas Club. How did you know that?"

Mr. Smith smiled modestly. "Research, again. Part of our Total Services Data Spread Intake. It helps us to deal more efficiently with the Consumer."

"I don't like it," said Bianca. There was a long silence. Bees sipped nectar from the roses, and a cardinal hopped across the ground.

"*We* like it," said Mr. Smith. "Now, remember, cash in advance, since there's no way we can enforce anything like a mechanic's lien in this line of work."

"*Oh.*" Bianca sighed, wishing herself back in time, back in Scranton, Pennsylvania, jumping rope. Then other images began to fill her mind. The ever-scowling Ferdie. Herself, very young, very fair, wearing black, president of the PTA. She looked at Mr. Smith. "Well—"

"Settled!"

Across the terrace, at the far side of the golden drawing room, the door to Ferdie's study flew open and he appeared in the doorway. "*Smith!*"

"Coming!" called Mr. Smith. And to Bianca, in a whisper, he asked, "You want yellow?"

"Yellow?"

"SMITH!"

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"Chrysanthemums. Yellow chrysanthemums."

It was only a week later that the brakes failed on Bianca's splendid car. Ferdie was driving and Bianca was beside him as they sailed down the long slope of the driveway at Ferdie's usual headlong pace. Neither was wearing a seatbelt.

Everybody agreed it was a very sad funeral. Services were held at the Total Serenity Chapel, a new place at the edge of town, where a little round man with shining eyes drew forth moving sounds from the organ. Several of the ladies from the PTA were there. Mrs. Brooks said what a pity it was, Mrs. LaFrance had been so sweet, so young. And Mrs. Garamaswamy, a very fine person from the Punjab who had a son Randy in the sixth grade who was a genius, said she understood Mr. LaFrance had been a very fine person, a real ruby in the rough, veritably.

Time passed, time effaced.

A Mrs. Lundgren was appointed to the PTA Board to serve out Mrs. LaFrance's unexpired term.

Bianca's purple Cadillac had long since been towed away from its fatal encounter with the oak at the foot of the driveway.

And after a decent interval, a For Sale sign appeared on the great sweep of lawn in front of the Foglett-LaFrance mansion. The place was being marketed by an outfit hitherto unknown in the neighborhood calld the TS Realty Company, and Mr. Lundgren remarked to Mrs. Lundgren that they were said to be asking quite a price.

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a *NEW* Peter Styles story by

JUDSON PHILIPS

In an introduction to one of Dashiell Hammett's Continental Op stories in EQMM some years ago, Ellery Queen posed the question: What's in a name? "When a writer needs a pseudonym," he asked, "how does he go about selecting it? Blindfold, from a telephone book? By some esoteric system of numbers, or through anagrammatical shuffling and reshuffling? Or is there a special meaning in the origin of most pen-names?" He thought there was, he said, going on to explain how several major detective-story writers had chosen their pseudonyms.

"Consider the case of Hugh Pentecost, pen-name of Judson P. Philips: Jud's middle initial stands for Pentecost, his mother's maiden name; also, Jud had a great-uncle actually named Hugh Pentecost, who was a well known lawyer in the New York of the 1890s. The original Hugh Pentecost's daughter (who is Jud's mother's first cousin) gave Jud permission to use the full name of Hugh Pentecost. It was, as Mr. P. says, 'a sort of natural choice.'"

Judson Philips has published over a hundred novels under both his own name and the pseudonym of Hugh Pentecost. But though he has published over a hundred stories in EQMM as written by Hugh Pentecost, this is the first ever in these pages under his real name, and about Peter Styles. Let's hear it out there—the warmest kind of welcome for Jud and for Peter, two time-proven pros . . .

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THE CRITICAL TIME

by JUDSON PHILIPS

Assigning Peter Styles to cover the story of senseless violence was almost routine for the managing editor of *Newsview Magazine,* particularly with one of the innocent victims of this violence a mutual friend. Violence in which innocent people are the victims is so commonplace in a troubled world that it is almost passed over by the media unless someone involved is in the public eye. The Middle East is a panorama of violence, innocent children bombed to death and uninvolved settlers massacred by the political enemies of their countries. In Ireland and England the uninvolved are slaughtered by car bombs and snipers. In Paris, in Central America, wherever there are acts of terrorism, the victims, by and large, are individuals who have played no part in the controversy.

The bombing and the resulting fire in the home of a British diplomat on the East Side of New York was just one more senseless horror. Ironically, the diplomat, the obvious target, was not at home when the bomb exploded. There were two victims, however—a man and a seven-year-old girl. They were in an apartment above the diplomat's quarters at the time, and might not even have known the intended victim if they had passed him in the hallway.

The man was Ted Wingate, sports editor for *Newsview*, so the magazine had a special interest in running down whoever was responsible.

"On the surface, it looks like dozens of other cases," Frank Devery told Peter Styles. Devery, *Newsview*'s managing editor, a dark, stockily built, balding man in his late fifties, sounded angry. "Political figure Cedric Henderson, one of England's United Nations team, was the intended victim. Some guy with an Irish brogue calls *The New York Times* to take 'credit' for the bombing. 'The IRA forever!' "

Peter Styles—slender, fair-haired, in his late thirties—listened, his blue eyes cold and hard. "Aside from the fact that Ted Wingate and a child were killed, what else is bothering you about this, Frank?" he asked.

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"Things don't add up," Devery said. "Cedric Henderson has been working for the British at the U.N. for a while now. He's an open, non-secret kind of guy. His comings and goings aren't hidden."

"So?"

"Cedric Henderson and his family are in London. He went back a couple of weeks ago, partly on vacation, partly to consult with Mrs. Thatcher and her cabinet. Anyone keeping an eye on him would have known he wasn't in his apartment and wasn't going to be for another week or so."

"Someone didn't bother to check him out," Peter said.

"Maybe." Devery's teeth clamped down on the stem of a pipe that wasn't lit. "The bomb squad says the bomb was set off by a clock-type mechanism set for seven o'clock in the evening."

"Dinnertime," Peter said.

"Sure, time you could expect Joe Blow to sit down to eat," Devery said. "But Henderson isn't Joe Blow. He and his wife usually dine out, they have a very, very active social life. If you wanted to be sure to get him, you'd set a bomb for the early hours of the morning when he'd be home in bed, wouldn't you?"

"If I was keeping tabs on him—yes."

"Something else we know about Henderson. He had nothing whatever to do with the British-Irish problem. His specialty is British-American trade."

"But he's British and prominent. Some of these IRA people wouldn't need anything more than that," Peter said.

Devery seemed to squirm in his chair. "It could be someone else was the target."

"What kind of a building is it?"

"It's a remodeled old brownstone. Two duplex apartments. Henderson and his wife occupy the first two floors. The two upper floors are rented by Marilyn Cantrell, a divorced woman—whose seven-year-old daughter died in the fire."

"That's where Ted Wingate was visiting?"

Devery gave Peter a level stare. "That's where Ted was living. He moved in with the lady some months ago. 'Love of my life' is what he told me."

"But she escaped the fire-bombing?"

"It was a freak coincidence," Devery said. "She was getting supper. Ted and Selina, the daughter, were playing one of those video games on the TV set. The Cantrell woman found she'd run out of olive oil for her salad dressing, Ted and the kid were having fun, so she

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slipped out to the corner deli to get some. She was at the cash register when she heard the explosion which shook the windows of the deli. When she walked out she saw her house was a blazing inferno. A passerby had to drag her away by force to keep her from trying to get back inside."

Peter's eyes narrowed. "Do you think it's possible the bomb was meant for Ted, the child, and her mother?"

Devery shrugged. "Or the owner of the building." He tapped the stack of notes on his desk. "He is one Mort Greenspan. He owns six other old brownstones he's remodeled into apartments. High-class operations, high-class tenants, no legal hassles reported. All sunshine and happiness—until this."

"Do you know anyone who had it in for Ted?" Peter asked.

"No. He was a straight reporter, not a commentator. No feuds with sports figures. As for his private life, he played the field until Marilyn Cantrell came into the picture."

"Maybe some jealous ex-girlfriend?"

"With bombs, clockwork timers, and the Irish Republican Army taking credit for trying to get Henderson?" Devery made an impatient gesture with his unlighted pipe. "It's not impossible. But in a case like this there are always signs pointing in other likely directions. They almost never pay off."

"I know," Peter said. "But sometimes they do."

"This woman of Ted's—Marilyn Cantrell—is the divorced wife of Bo Cantrell, the professional football player," Devery told him. "He's a linebacker for the Bucks. They call him 'The Hammer.' Fans love him for the savage way he sacks enemy quarterbacks."

"A violent man," Peter said.

"The divorce was ugly," Devery said. "Wife beating, physical abuse of the daughter."

"Would he blow up his wife and daughter?"

"According to your friend, Greg Maxvil, at Homicide, he didn't. He has a perfect alibi."

"Greg's on the case?"

Devery nodded. "One of the three. Bomb Squad, Arson, and Homicide. Why don't you talk to him?"

"I'm on my way," Peter said.

Lieutenant Greg Maxvil is a new breed of cop, a man with a law degree and a complete knowledge of the most modern scientific techniques of crime fighting. He is a trim, steely man with restless yet

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penetrating dark eyes that appear able to read the label on the inside of your shirt collar. Peter had become friends with Maxvil back in the days when he was writing an urbane and witty column about Broadway and its people—before a senseless violence had changed the whole pattern of his life. A murder in the theater had brought Peter and Maxvil together. Maxvil was a charming companion when he wasn't working, a man who liked theater, music, and painting. But when he was working, Maxvil turned cold and relentless. He had on his working face when Peter walked into his office.

"I had a feeling I might be seeing you," the detective said. "Ted Wingate was your friend, wasn't he?"

"Not a close friend, but we worked in the same shop."

"Do you know his girl?"

"Mrs. Cantrell? No."

"Pretty awful business for her," Maxvil said. "Her child, her man."

"You want to give it to me as you see it?" Peter asked.

The corner of Maxvil's mouth twitched. He had been on the case for more than twelve hours and so far he had discovered only dead ends. "All right. From the beginning," he said. "Cedric Henderson, the British diplomat, is a controversial figure. His home, and possibly important documents, were destroyed by the fire started by the bomb. Minutes after it happened, an IRA spokesman phoned *The Times* claiming responsibility. Well, these IRA boys aren't dummies. They must have known Henderson was in London. It makes you wonder, and look somewhere else."

"So you looked. Where?"

"The building owner, Mort Greenspan. He owns half a dozen or more properties in town. He could have enemies, though he denies knowing anyone who could be responsible for this.

"That took me to the people who really got it—Ted Wingate, the little girl, and Marilyn Cantrell, who would have gotten it if she hadn't run out of salad oil. The first person I thought of was Bo Cantrell, The Hammer—a violent kind of a guy not just professionally as a football player. He was charged with wife beating and child abuse during the divorce. He's been picked up half a dozen times for brawling in bars. But before I contacted him he was in here, telling us he knew we'd be wondering about him. Not to worry, he said—he had an alibi for the critical time—he had been with his girl and a man friend. They back him up."

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"What *is* the critical time?" Peter asked. "The bomb was set off by a timer device, I understand. Can you tell when it was planted?"

"The building custodian, a guy named Wisnooski who's worked for Greenspan for more than ten years, makes regular rounds in the late afternoon. He covers the whole house, including the inside stairways, from top to bottom to make sure all the hall lights are working and there's no trash around. He saw nothing out of the way. A little before seven, on her way out to the deli, Marilyn Cantrell noticed a black trash bag on the stairway. It wasn't usual but not significant to her at the time. Later the Bomb Squad found traces of that trash bag in the wreckage and think the bomb was in it, that it was left there between Wisnooski's trip up and down at five and Marilyn's trip down just before seven. That's the critical time for which Bo Cantrell has his alibi."

"He knew that was the critical time before you talked to him?"

Maxvil's dark eyes fixed almost angrily on Peter. "You don't often miss a trick, do you, pal?" he said.

"What about Wisnooski? He could have planted the bomb, couldn't he? He could be lying, couldn't he?"

"You know how it is in this business, Peter. You have hunches and you follow them or you don't. I have a hunch about Wisnooski. He's honest as the day is long."

"Then give me the names of Cantrell's alibi witnesses," Peter said, "and tell me where I can find Marilyn Cantrell."

"Walk softly, friend," Maxvil said. "We're dealing with a psycho killer."

Marilyn Cantrell looked like a once beautiful woman who had been struck by the plague. It was cruel, Peter knew, to question her so shortly after what had probably been the worst moment of her life. She sat curled in the corner of a loveseat in the impersonal hotel room where Peter found her through her lawyer. She had refused to see friends and refused to meet the press but had been given to understand that Peter was someone she should see. Her lips were drawn tightly together as she fought to keep them from trembling.

"Ted was my friend," Peter told her. "I'd like to tell you why I have a special interest in what has happened to you."

She nodded—barely—looking toward the corner of the room almost as though she wasn't listening.

"Quite a few years ago," Peter told her, "my father had been ill.

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I took him to a ski resort in Vermont, thinking that a couple of days of that fresh air and scenery would pep him up. On the way home, driving down a winding mountain road, two hopped-up kids began to play passing games with us. Our car was forced off the road, somersaulted down a deep ravine. I was thrown clear. When I came to, I could hear my father screaming in the burning car. After that, all I wanted in the world was to find those two hopheads and grind them into the earth."

Marilyn turned her head to look at him.

"Then I met the woman who was all I'd ever dreamed of. Grace. We married and it was more perfect than I can tell you. I was assigned by *Newsview* to cover a story on the West Coast. It would take several weeks and Grace went with me. To fill her time, she volunteered to help in a camp set up to care for Vietnamese refugees." Peter's voice went unsteady. "One afternoon an army of goons invaded the camp, shooting at everyone they saw. When they counted up the bodies later Grace was among them."

Marilyn whispered something he didn't quite hear. Oh no? God no? Please no? Please go?

"Ever since then," Peter went on, "my only interest in life has been tracking down people involved in that kind of violence, people who think nothing of killing the innocent."

It took her some minutes to collect herself. Then: "How can I help?" she asked.

"Has it crossed your mind that this may not have been political, that the bomb was aimed at you, Ted, and Selina?"

"We had no enemies."

"What about your ex-husband?"

"Bo?"

"Bo." Peter nodded. "The Hammer."

Marilyn hesitated. "But the police assured me he couldn't have done it. He has a perfect alibi for what they call 'the critical time.' "

"Does Cantrell know the inside layout of that building?" Peter asked.

"Of course . . . We lived there when we were first married."

After a moment of thought Peter went on. "There are stories about him abusing you and your daughter."

"We met in college," Marilyn said. "He was a star football player—a big powerful man I found to be gentle and compassionate. I was pregnant with someone else's child—someone who couldn't, or wouldn't, marry me. Bo said he didn't care, I fell in love with him,

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and we were married. After graduation he signed a contract with the Bucks—and suddenly we were well off. He drew a big salary. He became an idol of the fans because of the fierce way he played. And he changed. He was like someone I'd never known. First he became brutal with me. When he began to beat up on Selina I went to the police for help."

"Then came the divorce?"

She nodded.

"And that ended your contact?"

"Yes and no. He drinks a lot. He'd phone me from time to time, making drunken threats if I didn't agree to see him. I did once." She shivered. "Then when Ted and I became close he threatened to harm me if I took up seriously with another man. I got an unlisted phone number."

"But you don't suspect him of the bombing?"

"The police assured me he couldn't have done it. And then he called me here at the hotel, grief-stricken about Selina, asking if he could do anything to help—did I need extra money or anything."

"And so you think he's in the clear?"

"Yes."

"I'm not so sure," Peter said.

Maxvil had given Peter the names of the two people who had supplied Cantrell with his alibi. One of them was his current girlfriend, Sue Wilson, and the other was Jack Brooks, a teammate on the Bucks. There was nothing necessarily suspicious about a man being alibied by friends. Who else might he have been with? And yet—

Sue Wilson was a pert blonde who must have looked tiny beside the giant Bo Cantrell. As she opened her apartment door she gave Peter a look he had seen before—the female assessment of an attractive and possibly available male.

The small living room was like a game-of-chance display at an amusement park. There were teddy bears, dolls, stuffed Disney animals, and a huge color television set.

"Bo was here when it came on the news around eight o'clock," the girl said. "It was a terrible shock for him. He was divorced and all that, but he loved that kid like she was his own."

"How had you and he and Jack Brooks planned to spend the evening?" Peter asked.

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"Actually, we had already been out, to a movie. We went to a four o'clock show, got back here a little after six."

The critical time. "What was the movie?" Peter asked.

"There's a little theater a couple of blocks from here," she said. "It's called Golden Oldies. They show only great old films. We saw *Mutiny on the Bounty* with Charles Laughton, Clark Gable, Franchot Tone."

"So you saw the film and got back here a little after six?"

"Yeah. I made some coffee and hamburgers, then we turned on the TV."

"And?"

"And around eight o'clock the news came on about the bombing and the fire."

"You say Bo was shocked?"

"Well, wouldn't you be? He took off right away to see if he could be any help."

"And that was at eight o'clock?"

She nodded. "A minute or two before. It was just at the end of the news program."

Thanks," Peter said, getting to his feet.

"Are you going to mention me in your piece, Mr. Styles?" she asked.

"I think you can count on it, luv," he said.

Peter found the Golden Oldies movie house a few blocks away. The sign on the marquee indicated that the film presently showing was *Rebecca* with Laurence Olivier and Joan Fontaine. Peter went to the box office. "I was told you were showing *Mutiny on the Bounty*," he said to the girl in the glass booth.

"That was last week," the girl said. "We change our program every Sunday."

"*Mutiny* wasn't here yesterday?"

"*Rebecca* started yesterday," the girl said. She seemed positive.

So much for at least part of Sue Wilson's alibi for her boy friend.

According to Maxvil's information, Jack Brooks worked out at a gym on Thirty-fourth Street every afternoon between three and five. Peter found him there just as he was about ready to knock off for the afternoon. He was a big powerful man with a child's face. Peter explained who he was and why he was there. "I understand you, Bo, and Sue Wilson went to a movie last night. What was the movie?"

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Brooks seemed distracted. "I don't know. Something about a mutiny."

"*Mutiny on the Bounty?*"

"That was it."

"Did you like it?"

"It was all right. I'm not much of a movie fan."

Peter eyed him steadily. He seemed to have trouble sitting still. "That was a great scene where Charles Laughton played the harmonica."

Brooks laughed. "Yeah," he said.

"After the movie you all went to Sue's apartment?"

"Yeah."

"Did you have something to eat?"

"Yeah."

"What?"

Brooks shrugged. "A couple of beers, I guess. Some cheese and crackers."

"And then the news came on about the bombing and the fire and Bo's kid?"

"Yeah." He shook his head.

"On the radio."

"Yeah."

"And Bo was with you all the time, from when you went to the movie until you heard the news on the radio?"

"Yeah."

It was twilight when Peter reached his apartment just off Irving Place—a ground-floor apartment with a garden at the rear. Peter opened the French windows that led out into the garden and stood watching as lights popped on in the surrounding apartment buildings. Then he went to the telephone and tried reaching Maxvil. The detective was not at his office, nor did his home phone answer.

Peter sat down at his desk, took a small cassette tape-recorder out of his desk drawer, set it to record, and began to talk out the two interviews he'd had with Sue Wilson and Jack Brooks—the movie that wasn't playing, the coffee and hamburgers Sue said she'd made versus the beer, cheese, and crackers Brooks said he'd had, the TV set on which Sue said they'd heard the news about the bombing versus Brooks' radio, Brooks' recollection of Charles Laughton playing the harmonica. Peter doubted that Charles Laughton had ever

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played a harmonica in his life—he certainly didn't play one in *Mutiny on the Bounty*.

The doorbell rang. Peter turned off the tape-recorder and put it back in the desk drawer. He got up and went to the door. Standing outside was a giant of a man with a bushy black beard. "Come in, Cantrell," Peter said, "I've been expecting you."

The Hammer pushed past Peter into the room, looking around to see who else might be there. Then he whirled on Peter. "You had to start messing around, didn't you, Styles?"

"I guess I did," Peter said. He moved back around behind his desk and sat down.

Cantrell followed him, leaned on the desk, and breathed down on Peter. The smell of liquor was almost overpowering. "You're not going to get away with it, you know."

"I might get lucky," Peter said, "if you were as careless about coming here as you've been about everything else."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your alibi is a farce," Peter said. "You went to see a movie that wasn't playing. One of your witnesses says you had coffee and hamburgers afterward, the other says you had beer and cheese. One of them heard the news of the bombing on television, the other heard it on the radio."

"We'll get it cleaned up," Cantrell said. "Susie saw *Mutiny on the Bounty* on Saturday and assumed it was still playing yesterday. The next person who noses around will get a story that checks out."

"And what I know?"

"You won't be around to tell anyone, Styles."

Peter seemed to grow tense where he sat. "There are other things you were careless about. You used to live in that apartment with Marilyn. Do you still carry the front-door key with you? Is that how you were able to get in to place the bomb without attracting attention or ringing anyone's bell?"

Cantrell made an instinctive gesture toward his pants pocket.

"Did you call *The Times* and say you were the IRA?"

"Good dodge, don't you think?"

"Why did you do it, Cantrell?" Peter asked.

Bo Cantrell took a deep breath. "Because she made a bum out of me! In court, saying I beat up on her! Isn't that what happens in all marriages? And that sniveling kid, saying I beat up on her? She wouldn't behave! What was I supposed to do, let them both be anything they wanted—on my money? They tried to make a fool out of

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me before my friends and fans! Marilyn got lucky, but her time will come. And your time is now, Mr. Styles!"

And then a clear, cold voice came from directly behind him. "What you feel at the back of your head, Cantrell, is the barrel of my service revolver. Twitch one muscle and I'll blow your head off!"

Peter had seen Greg Maxvil at the French windows and watched him come across the room, any sound he might have made covered by Cantrell's roaring voice.

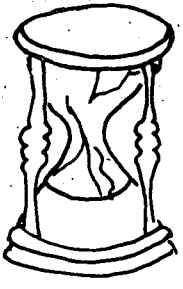
"Come and get him, boys," Maxvil called out without seeming to raise his voice.

Two plainclothesmen came from the garden.

Peter looked at his friend. "I had a feeling he'd come here," he said. "If the worst happened, I hoped you'd find the tape I made of what I found out this afternoon." He opened the desk drawer and took out the cassette recorder.

"Knowing you were going to check out the Wilson girl and Brooks and that they'd let Cantrell know," Maxvil said, "I put a tail on Cantrell." He shrugged. "And here I am."

Peter smiled at his friend. "With all my thanks, chum," he said. "For being here, and for being you."



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The last thing Johnnie Belam needed was an accident report to the local nick . . .

A VERY ROUGH ELEMENT

by JEAN BOWDEN

The light was waning to that glimmering grey that moves your hand to the headlights switch. I was just reaching out when a spindly shape wavered in front of me. The brakes were already on when I felt a bump and heard a cry.

I was out of the car like a greyhound out of the trap. The last thing I needed was an accident report to the local nick. On the grass verge just in front of my fender I could see a tangle of wheels and skinny legs. I sorted them out, to find I had a small boy—ten years old, about—and a bike, man-size.

"What the devil are you playing at?" I cried, angry because I was so relieved at his scrambling to his feet all in one piece. "Cycling around the countryside with no lights!"

"I—my lamp battery's gone flat," he said in a scared voice.

That told me two things. He was a bad liar, and it wasn't his bike. The bike had a dynamo fitment for its lamps.

"Whose bike is it?" I made myself sound accusing.

"It's mine."

"What's the frame number then?"

"GK2042704," he said promptly. He was banking on the fact that it was too dark to check without a flashlight.

"And why is this bike of yours six sizes too big for you?"

"I'll grow into it," he said, in uncertain tones that echoed some maternal remark about a winter raincoat.

"In about eight years," said I. "Come on, whose is it?"

"It—belongs to my family."

"Right. Hop in the car and we'll take it back to the family, and you with it."

"No," he said, and made an attempt to set the bike on its wheels and get aboard. The bike fell over and the rider with it. I heard an

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exclamation as his knee came into abrupt contact with the road through the material of his jeans.

Again I sorted him out from the bike. "Come on," I said, holding him by the sleeve of his sweater, "I can't have you wobbling all over the road in the dark—you'll kill yourself. I'll take you home."

"No," he said forcibly. And then with a gasp of near-despair: "I'm running away."

I paused. "I see," I said. I'd run away from home myself, but I'd waited some five or six years longer than this hero. "When did you set out?"

"Eleven o'clock this morning."

It was now about five on a chilly December Saturday. If he'd been cycling since eleven in the wobbly way I'd observed, he'd covered maybe fifteen miles, allowing for frequent falling off. It was a miracle he'd survived so long when you thought of his erratic control of the big bike. A tough little kid—but shivering with cold through the handknit sweater his mother had probably made for him. "Your ma will be sick with worry," I said.

He struggled to speak over a sob which made a sound like "huk, huk" in his chest. "She doesn't care!" he blurted.

"I bet she's got the police looking for you. It's a wonder they haven't picked you up by now."

"I kept off main roads," he said, pride getting the better of misery.

"Good for you." It was, too—he'd done well to get this far without being caught. But I couldn't stand here arguing with him. I too had good reason to keep off main roads—and no desire to attract the attention of cops looking for a lad on a bike. "What's your name?" I inquired.

"David Co—" He bit off the surname.

"Right you are, David. Climb aboard."

He pulled away from me, crying, "No!"

"It's okay. I'm not going to turn you in to the cops, if that's what's bothering you. But I can't let you cycle around being a danger to traffic. Come on."

Still he dragged back. "My mother told me never to go in a car with a stranger."

"Good advice. But I'm not a stranger, am I? I'm the bloke who nearly crushed you to death. If you'll feel better, we'll have an introduction. I'm John Belam. Come on, David Coe, time's getting on and I've things to do."

I could tell he was tempted. His legs must have been tired from

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reaching for those pedals. Besides, it was cold, and he probably hadn't eaten since eleven. "I'll come if you promise it's all honest and aboveboard," he said.

I said, very solemn: "I promise." Little did he know, as they say, that there was nothing honest or aboveboard about me.

I loaded his bike into the back of the station wagon on top of the cartons which were the real reason I didn't drive him straight to the local cop-shop. But truth to tell, I'd taken to David Coe quite a bit. He reminded me of myself at that age. Although—was I ever that innocent?

When we got to my place I left all the gear outside while I took David indoors. He was still cold and shivery even though I'd lent him an old cardigan I keep in the car. I switched on extra heating by lighting the oven, then made him a big mug of Bovril after showing him the bread and the butter and the contents of the fridge.

"This is great," he said enthusiastically, sitting up at the scrubbed-wood kitchen table with a Dagwood that almost hid him from view. "You've got a nice house—it's not so shiny and new as ours." He swallowed. "I thought you'd make me go home."

"I suppose I should. Why exactly are you running away?"

"There are reasons."

"Don't you like the shiny new house?"

"Our old one was better," he said in a voice of anger and resentment.

"Didn't like moving, is that it? Lost all your school-friends?"

He shook his head, looking mournful. But he took another bite of his sandwich.

"Have you done something wicked? Break a window? Get a bad end-of-term report?"

He shook his head, chewed the mouthful of sandwich, chased it down with hot Bovril, then decided to trust me. "It's my stepfather," he said.

"Oh." I'd had stepfather trouble myself—a long time ago, it seemed now, and not important any more.

"It's *his* bike," he added in a burst of confidence. "He cycles every morning before breakfast. 'Daily exercise is important,' he keeps telling us. I bet he's hopping mad it's gone."

"I bet. What's so bad about him?" I asked. "Did he wallop you?" I had memories of my own stepfather at that point.

"Oh, he doesn't believe in corporal punishment. A few hours alone

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in my room or a week without television will teach me a more lasting lesson." He was mimicking the man's tone, his voice solemn and sonorous.

"He isn't a parson, is he?"

David looked at me, and we both began to laugh. "No, he's a lawyer's clerk. 'Very responsible work,' " he mimicked again.

"Well, so it is." I had reason to know. I'd hired a few lawyers in my time, with excellent results. Not a single conviction, though one or two near misses.

That reminded me—the stuff in the car would have to be moved. I'd never planned to leave it sitting out there in the dusk. I said: "Look, David, I have to make an important phonecall—"

"You're going to phone the police," he guessed tensely.

"Of course not! A friend was expecting me. I just want to get through to him and explain. If you're still hungry make yourself another sandwich—see what you can find in the larder."

Cliff Dyers answered on the first ring. "Where the hell are you?" he roared. "You should have been here half an hour ago! I've been nearly up the wall!"

"Sorry," I said, "I got involved. I can't get to you this evening after all."

"Involved?" he groaned. "Involved? Since Lisbeth left you, you've been a right Don Juan!"

I was going to say that it wasn't a woman but realized that to say it was a boy would make him groan all the louder. "Listen, Cliff, you'll have to come and fetch the stuff."

"Me?" He was indignant. "Our agreement was that you'd deliver."

"I know that, but it so happens I can't. You'll have to fetch it away."

"I will not!"

"Suit yourself," I said. "In that case, those cartons will sit outside in my station wagon for any keen copper to glance in at—especially once the news of the break-in is circulated."

He was speechless for a moment. Then he said with subdued force: "Have you gone bonkers? You *can't* leave those cartons out there!"

"I'm not having them in the house. You know my rule. If you don't collect them, they stay out there."

"Blimey, she must be a smasher if you can't tear yourself away for an hour to make the delivery!" He waited for me to change my mind, but when I didn't he said with gritty impatience: "If I come

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out and take the risk of carting them away that cuts your share by half."

"By a third, Cliff. Don't forget, I've taken all the risks so far. Go on, get your coat on and come fetch the goods. And listen, you'll have to shift a bike to get at the cartons."

"A bike? Don't tell me you nicked the watchman's bike? I thought you were above that kind of thing! Still—" he was thoughtful "—not a bad camouflage for the boxes, I suppose."

"I'll put the car keys in the flowerpot outside the door," I told him. "Put them through the letterbox when you're finished."

"Ha," Cliff smirked. "Don't want to disturb the little lady, eh, Johnnie?"

The truth was, I didn't think Cliff was a suitable acquaintance for David Coe.

When I went back to the kitchen, David was halfway through a sandwich which had used up a jar of venison pâté Lisbeth had bought in Harrods one day we went shopping there. He said in a perplexed tone, "I usually have a glass of milk with my supper but you haven't got any."

"No, I don't use it."

"Doesn't anybody else drink it?"

"There isn't anybody else."

—Not since Lisbeth walked out, worn down by the anxiety of never knowing what I was up to. The little house she'd fixed up with stripped pine furniture and chintz curtains still felt as if it was her home, but she never came here any more. To tell the truth, I'd been getting to the stage recently where I thought I might give it all up so as maybe to get her back. A steady job and no hassle with the law—Lisbeth had never said it in so many words, but those were the prerequisites.

While I was putting the kettle on for tea I heard Cliff arriving outside to take away the cartons. To cover the sounds, I asked David about his family. His mother, he said, wasn't bad, but he couldn't understand why she'd wanted to marry again. His own dad had been much nicer than the new one—who made everything worse by asking to be called Daddy.

"What would you rather call him?"

He was silent.

"You see? It's difficult—and perhaps it's as difficult for him as it is for you."

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He considered it. "But if it's difficult, why did he want to marry my mother anyhow?"

That was too difficult to *explain,* so I asked him about his real father. He said he'd made furniture, by hand and to special order, in a shed at the side of the garden of their old house. He'd let David help with the simple things like sanding-down or gluing in a chair stretcher. "It smelt lovely in that shed—wood shavings and melting glue and leather. He was good with leather. He mended my football when the seams unraveled. He was great." He drew in a great gulp of air. "My stepfather won't even let me go to football matches!" he cried. "He thinks 'a very rough element support soccer.' "

"Well, some of them aren't angels, that's true."

"He gets very angry if I even *talk* about football. He says there are more intelligent things to discuss—and then he mutters to my mother that I only go on about football to annoy him."

I was trying to frame a question to find out if there had been a divorce when David put up a hand to brush at a tear sliding past his nose. "I wish my real dad hadn't died," he said. "He cut himself with an adze and it got infected and then the stuff they gave him to cure it made him worse. He was allergous—"

"Allergic?" I suggested.

He nodded. "It's so unfair!"

How right he was. I was about to embark on a discourse about fairness having nothing to do with life, but decided against it. I was edging round to talking about his mother again, and how she was worrying about his disappearance, when there was a rush of tires on the gravel outside, the sound of footsteps, and loud banging on the front door.

David shot up out of his chair, panic-stricken. "You told on me!" he cried. "That phonecall was to my stepfather!"

"Come on, David," I reminded him, "I don't even know his name!" I was startled too.

There was more hammering on the door. "Open up, Belam, we know you're in there! This is the police!"

David looked at me, his face white.

"It's all right," I said, "it's nothing to do with you. I won't tell them you've run away." Heaven knows what he thought they might do to him because he'd stolen his stepfather's bike. "What's your mother's name, David?"

He stared. "Mrs. Colefax."

"No, her first name."

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"Mary," he said, after a hesitation.

"Open the door, Belam. We've got a warrant!"

Had they? A search warrant meant somebody had grassed. It was no use being angry about it—in these hard times it stood to reason the second-raters weren't going to say no to a quid or two passed over a barroom table. "I don't know when exactly, but if you hear of a break-in at an electronics factory that'll be him, Johnnie Belam. They say he'll get four grand for the goods." Some so-called friend of mine, someone I'd been too forthcoming with.

So now the alarm had been raised when the nightwatchman made his six o'clock round, and the Law was following up information received.

I let them in. It was Sergeant Pastellan with two men. Pastellan was waving the search warrant. He drew up short when David Colefax walked out of the kitchen into the hall. "Who's this?"

"My sister Mary's boy—David. David, this is Sergeant Pastellan of the local crime squad."

"What's he doing here?" Pastellan asked.

"Haven't you ever heard of Saturday football matches?"

"You're not telling me *you've* been at a football match this afternoon!"

"You're right—I'm not telling you anything until I know what this is all about."

"Come off it," Pastellan said. "Daystar Electronics was done this afternoon. It's got your name written all over it. And we heard you were planning it, Johnnie."

"You shouldn't believe all you hear. Is that all you've got—a rumor?"

"And a search warrant, laddo. We expect to find four cartons of components."

"Feel free," I said, waving them toward the interior of the house.

Pastellan hesitated. His broad West Country face showed doubt. If I were unworried about a search, it probably meant the goods weren't on the premises. But he had to go through the motions. He sent his two men upstairs while he himself searched the ground floor, watched by David, who was entranced with this closeup view of something he'd seen only on television.

They soon gave up. Pastellan said: "I'll have your car keys." I gave them to him, having retrieved them from the doormat as I let them in. They went out, leaving the front door open. We could hear them slamming the doors of the station wagon . . .

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Pastellan came back frowning. No cartons of components. But he was unwilling to let go so easily. "Where did you get that bike?" he demanded. "The one in the car?"

"I bought it," I said. "Some time ago."

"Oh, did you? In that case, I suppose you've got the purchase slip with the frame number?"

"Of course I have," I said. "It's in my desk." I led the way into the living room and made a pretense of searching among the papers there. "It's here—just have the patience—"

"Oh, Uncle John, your memory's hopeless," said young David. "The frame number is PT61236K, Sergeant."

It wasn't anything like the number he'd originally given me. If Pastellan actually checked, we were done for.

Pastellan shrugged and turned away. "Don't think this is the end of it, Belam. We'll track down those components, take my word for it."

I didn't argue, though I knew he was wrong. The components were long gone to a buyer Cliff could guarantee would keep his mouth shut.

When I went back into the kitchen after seeing them out, David was munching some biscuits he'd discovered. "Still hungry?" I said. "We could stop for some fish and chips on our way home."

"Oh," he said. "Are you going to take me home?"

"Well, I'll have to in the end. It's either that or the cops—and I can't take you to them after I've said you're my nephew, can I?"

"No, that's right," he said. "And what if I blackmail you with that to make you let me stay?"

"Oh, come on, David. We don't do things like that."

He eyed me. "Can I have double chips with my fish?"

"Certainly not. They'd give you nightmares, and your mother would be cross. She'd never let me see you again."

He studied what was left of his biscuit. "Are we going to see each other again?"

"I thought—we might take in a football match."

He looked up. Something in his expression told me that his lawyer's clerk of a stepfather wasn't going to take to a thief like me.

"Put it this way, kid," I said. "I'm the fellow that found you pedaling about in the twilight on a bike too big for you—to the risk of your life and limb to say nothing of everybody else. I'm the fellow who took you home and gave you a meal and talked you into being

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sensible. Seems to me if I suggest a football match or two, they aren't going to say no."

"But you're the fellow who had four cartons in the back of your station wagon too—aren't you?"

I sighed. "That's true. But I won't mention that if you won't."

He looked at me.

"Besides," I added, "it's not going to happen again."

"Honest? You promise?"

"You're some chap to be asking for promises," I said. "Come on, what fish do you want with your chips?"

The way I look at it is this. If you're planning to lose friends who shop you to the police, you might as well replace them with a nice kid from a decent family, especially when the kid needs someone to help him through a bad patch.

And if his parents show a justifiable anxiety about him taking up with a man who picked him up in a car—well, if I can talk Lisbeth into coming home, that ought to reassure them thoroughly.

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a *NEW* Captain Leopold story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Molly served the strawberries with whipped cream and settled into the chair opposite Leopold. "See what a good wife I'm going to make?"

Carol Fletcher sat, too. Since their children were grown and gone from home, she'd become more assertive, more independent. "Now if only they'd learn to be good husbands," she said, only half in jest.

"There she goes again," Fletcher sighed. "Pretty soon she'll be telling us we should quit the force and take an honest job in a factory."

"Well, I'd have a lot more peace of mind if you worked with Joe over at Greenways."

"Your brother Joe?" Leopold asked her. "How's he doing?"

Carol shrugged. "We don't see much of him. My point is that at least Stella doesn't have to lie awake nights, wondering if he'll get home alive . . ."

FINDING JOE FINCH

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It was shortly after Captain Leopold and Molly Calendar announced their plans to marry that Lieutenant Fletcher and his wife had them over for dinner. Leopold and Fletcher had been a team for more than twenty years, and he was pleased that Fletcher approved of his decision.

"It's about time you married again, Captain. None of us is getting any younger, and you were divorced before I ever knew you."

"I've been single too long," Leopold agreed. They were chatting

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over the dinner table while Molly helped Fletcher's wife Carol in the kitchen.

"Have you set the date yet?"

"It'll be sometime in the next few months—certainly by summer. Molly has some court cases she needs to get scheduled, before we know when we can get away for a couple of weeks."

"Is she going to continue with her law practice?"

Leopold nodded. "That's the plan, although she'd like to join one of the big firms and get out of the public defender's office."

"Talking about us?" Carol asked as she came from the kitchen with coffee. Molly followed with a tray of dessert. Leopold was pleased to see them getting along together. He'd always liked Carol.

"Of course," Fletcher told her with a smile. "What else do men talk about?"

Molly served the strawberries with whipped cream and settled into the chair opposite Leopold. "See what a good wife I'm going to make?"

Carol Fletcher sat, too. Since their children were grown and gone from home, she'd become more assertive, more independent. "Now if only they'd learn to be good husbands," she said, only half in jest.

"There she goes again," Fletcher sighed. "Pretty soon she'll be telling us we should quit the force and take an honest job in a factory."

"Well, I'd have a lot more peace of mind if you worked with Joe over at Greenways."

"Your brother Joe?" Leopold asked her. "How's he doing?"

Carol shrugged. "We don't see much of him. My point is that at least Stella doesn't have to lie awake nights, wondering if he'll get home alive."

The conversation quickly switched to other topics, and as near as Leopold could remember later that was the only reference to Joe Finch all evening.

But two events the following Tuesday reminded Leopold of the conversation, though at first they seemed unrelated. Shortly before noon, the payroll office at the Greenways plant was held up and robbed by a lone gunman wearing a ski-mask. A plant security-guard who chased after him was shot and killed. And while Fletcher was at the scene investigating the crime, his sister-in-law, Stella Finch, called headquarters looking for him. Leopold took the call and identified himself. He'd met Joe Finch and his wife only once,

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some years earlier, at a Fourth of July cookout in Fletcher's backyard.

"What can I do for you, Stella?"

"Joe didn't come home for lunch, and I was wondering if he'd stopped by there to see Fletcher."

"I haven't seen him, Stella, but he's on a case right now at the Greenways plant. Maybe they ran into each other out there."

"Maybe," she said, sounding dubious.

"Does he come home every day for lunch?" Leopold asked.

"A couple of times a week. He said he'd be home today."

"If Fletcher ran into him, I'll have him give you a call, Stella. Okay?"

"Fine," she said. "Thank you, Captain."

He hung up and got back to work helping Connie Trent with a week-old murder case she was handling. An arrest had been made and it was a matter of preparing the evidence for the District Attorney's office. They were both still working on it when Fletcher returned at midafternoon.

"What's the story?" Leopold asked.

Fletcher gave a frustrated sigh. "An inside job, for sure—but they've got over five hundred employees. No one but an employee could have gotten past the guards at the gates. He slipped a ski-mask over his face, pulled a gun, and got away with more than fifty thousand dollars."

"Don't they pay by check?"

"Yeah, but they have a check-cashing service for employees and always keep a large amount of cash on hand. Nothing like this ever happened before."

"What about the man who was killed?"

"A forty-six-year-old security guard named Marvin Wise. The cashier pressed a silent alarm and Wise came running just in time to see the bandit running away. He went after him and got two bullets in the chest."

"No sign of the killer?"

Fletcher shook his head. "We searched the immediate area for clues, thinking he might have dropped the ski-mask or even the money, but there was nothing. It's a big place."

"What was he wearing?"

"Jeans and a zipper jacket—like half the guys in the place. It happened just before noon when the employees were going out to lunch. Chances are our man was long gone before we even arrived."

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"All right. Type up your report and we'll go over it later." As Fletcher headed for his office Leopold added, "Oh, did you see your brother-in-law out there?"

"Joe? No, why?"

"His wife called here looking for him. He was due home for lunch."

Fletcher grunted. "Why'd she think he'd be here? I haven't seen him in a month."

Leopold and Connie went back to work, leaving the question unanswered.

Sergeant Turner from the Missing Persons Division phoned Leopold at Molly's apartment that evening. "Sorry to bother you, Captain. When you weren't at home, I thought I'd try you there."

"That's all right, Turner. What is it?"

"Got a report of a missing person, Joseph Finch. Brother-in-law of Lieutenant Fletcher. I couldn't reach Fletcher and I thought you should know about it. Mrs. Finch says he didn't come home from work and his foreman says he never came back after lunch. I know you guys had a robbery and murder at Greenways today—"

"Yeah," Leopold said. "Thanks for letting me know, Turner. I'll try to get back to you in the morning."

He sat staring at the telephone. "What's the trouble?" Molly asked, coming in from the kitchen.

"I don't know." He told her about the call.

"You think the two are related?"

Before he could answer, the phone rang again and Molly took it. She handed him the receiver with a smile.

"Captain, this is Fletcher."

"Yes, Fletcher. Sergeant Turner just called me."

"About Joe?"

"Yes. Has he turned up?"

"I'm afraid not. We're over at Stella's now. She's a wreck."

"I'll come over," Leopold said.

He hung up and went for his coat.

"You're going out?" Molly asked.

He nodded. "They're over at Stella Finch's house. She's upset. Joe still hasn't come home."

"Do you want me to come along?"

He shook his head. "Get some rest. I'll call you in the morning."

"She was right about being married to a cop."

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"Carol? Yes, she was right." They kissed and she saw him out the door . . .

When he reached the house on the suburban street just north of the city, lights were on in nearly every room. Carol greeted him at the door and led him into the living room where Stella Finch was waiting for word of her missing husband. A framed recent photograph of him, with a bushy black beard she said she disliked, sat prominently on the table next to her.

"I'm sorry about all of this, Mrs. Finch," Leopold said.

"Call me Stella," she said. "We met once."

"I remember." What he remembered was a funny, gossipy little woman whose company he'd enjoyed on a summer afternoon. She bore little resemblance to the older, sober Stella Finch he saw now.

"We've checked all the hospitals," Fletcher told Leopold. "Nothing."

Leopold sat down opposite Stella Finch. "I hope you'll forgive me," he said, "but I have to ask you some rather personal questions. How have things been between you and Joe? Had you noticed any changes in him recently?"

"What sort of changes?"

"Less affection, perhaps."

"I—I don't know."

"Were you having any money problems?"

"We've always had those. They don't pay much at Greenways."

"Stella, a man was killed there this morning and fifty thousand dollars was stolen. Is there any possibility that Joe could have been involved in that?"

It was Carol who answered from across the room. "You're talking about my brother! Are you calling him a thief? And a murderer?"

"I'm not calling him anything, Carol. I'm just trying to help find him."

"Missing Persons isn't your department. He doesn't even live in the city limits. You want him because you think he's implicated in that robbery."

Leopold sighed. "Be reasonable, Carol. The robbery and murder took place at Greenways just before the lunch hour. Joe was last seen on his way to lunch. There could be a connection. Maybe Joe happened upon the killer in the parking lot and got taken as a hostage." He turned back to Stella Finch. "Is there any chance Joe could purposely be involved in something like this?" he asked.

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"No. No, I'm sure he couldn't be."

"But you tried to phone Fletcher when Joe didn't come home for lunch, even though they hadn't seen each other in a month. Why did you think he might have gone to headquarters?"

"He said something last night about wanting to see Fletcher. I didn't know what for, and I only half remembered him saying it. But when he didn't turn up I thought that was where he might be."

"Did Joe ski?"

"No."

"Did he own a ski-mask?"

"No."

"Had he said anything recently about needing money?"

"I told you, we've had money problems from the day we were married. Our son Ned got to college on a scholarship or he wouldn't be there at all. I've worked off and on to help out, and I'm looking for another job now." She was close to tears.

"Captain," Fletcher said quietly.

Later, as they were leaving, Leopold told Fletcher, "I got a bit carried away with my questioning. I probably shouldn't have pressed her so hard right now."

"You were horrible!" Carol said and got in the car.

"They're family," Fletcher tried to explain.

"The security guard, Marvin Wise, had a family too."

"I know." Fletcher looked sympathetic, then made a decision. "Look, if it starts to seem that Joe was involved, you'll have to put someone else on the case."

"We can talk about that later. Tomorrow morning, we'd better take a run out to Greenways."

The plant occupied some two hundred acres at the edge of the city, much of it warehousing and shipping departments for the score of plastic products manufactured at Greenways—goods as diverse as high-impact auto parts and foam wrestling-mats were made there, with workers often being shifted to assorted production jobs to meet fluctuations in demand.

When Leopold and Fletcher arrived at midmorning, they were met at the front gate by the head foreman, a tall, competent-looking man named Bernie McGrath. "Did you catch him?" he asked immediately.

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"No luck yet," Fletcher said. "This is Captain Leopold. We'd like to look around your plant."

"Sure thing."

Leopold shook hands with McGrath and said, "I understand the production workers have individual lockers."

"That's right. We like them to wear white-cotton coats on some of the jobs. They keep them in the lockers along with their personal belongings."

Leopold took a folded paper from his pocket. "We have a search warrant here for the locker of Joseph Finch."

McGrath didn't even look at it. "They all supply their own locks. You'll have to break it open."

"We brought a spare key from his home," Fletcher explained. "The warrant was just to save time in case you gave us an argument."

"Look, fellas, you'll get no argument from me. You think Finch pulled the job?"

"What do you think?" Leopold wanted to know. "Are you a friend of his?"

"I know him. He's just one of the guys to me. Always seemed like a nice fella."

"No trouble?"

"None at all."

"How about with the women employees? Does he like the ladies?" Leopold sensed Fletcher's displeasure at his question.

"Oh, sure. Nobody special, though, if that's what you mean."

"Who does he work with?"

"Well, we shift people around. This month Joe's been running a machine that extrudes plastic beading for automobile upholstery. Come on, I'll show you."

The plant was surprisingly clean and airy, with wide aisles between the banks of machines and the individual work areas. As they paused at an untended machine, a blonde young woman across the aisle asked, "You running tours now, Bernie?"

"Sure, Gert, why not?" The foreman smiled at her, then turned his attention to the machine, showing them an overhead hopper filled with tiny blue-plastic pellets. "We can mix these pellets to match any color at all and then extrude the beading like Gert there is doing on her machine."

"Was this where Joe Finch was working yesterday?"

McGrath nodded. "Come on, I'll show you his locker."

He led them down a narrow hallway to a large locker room filled

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with several rows of dull-green-metal boxes. Finch's was number 335. Leopold opened it with the duplicate key Stella had given him. A white-cotton coat was hanging in there along with an old red sweater. The only other thing in the locker was a blue ski-mask.

Leopold lifted it out gingerly. Without a word, Fletcher produced a plastic evidence bag and Leopold dropped it inside.

That evening over dinner Leopold told Molly about the latest developments. "The lab is checking the ski-mask for hairs. There's still no sign of Joe. We've had to issue a warrant for his arrest."

"Is Fletcher taking it hard?"

"Of course. He had to go home and break the news to Carol."

"It just seems so unlikely that a brother of hers could—"

"I didn't know him well," Leopold interrupted. "Even Fletcher hadn't seen him in a month. People change, and sometimes they can hide that change from those closest to them. We know he had financial problems. Maybe they just got to be too much for him to handle."

The meal was not the pleasant affair he'd hoped for. The cloud of Joe Finch seemed to hang over the table. Molly said she'd had a tiring day in court, and after dessert Leopold paid the bill and drove her home. By nine o'clock he was back at his own apartment.

As he was unlocking the door, a nearby voice called his name. He turned to see Carol Fletcher step out of the shadows. "Carol! What's the trouble?"

"You know what the trouble is. The real question is how we're dealing with it. I've just had a terrible row with my husband. I was out driving around to cool off and I thought maybe you could help."

"I'll do whatever I can," Leopold assured her. "Come on in."

She entered the apartment and sat down without removing her coat. "He says my brother may have killed that guard."

"Fletcher has a job to do, Carol. Just as I have."

"And his job comes before his family, right?" she asked bitterly.

"That murdered guard had a family, too," Leopold reminded her. "But that's not the point. Fletcher's not trying to railroad your brother. He's only trying to get at the truth."

"Do you have to love your work this much?" she asked, trying to fight back the tears. "Does it go with the badge?"

"We don't love it, Carol. If Joe did cause someone's death, would you want him to get away with it?"

"Yes, I think I would. He's still my brother."

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Leopold took a deep breath. "Carol, I have to ask you this. Are you or Stella helping him? Do you know where he's hiding?"

"I won't answer that! You have no right to ask it!"

"I have every right, Carol, as a police officer and as a friend."

She stood up, her anger overtaking the tears. "I thought I could come to you for some sort of help, but you're all the same, aren't you?"

"Fletcher and I are the same," Leopold told her. As she rushed out of the apartment he called after her, "Go home to him, Carol."

He went to the bedroom where the telephone was, intending to do the sensible thing, phone Fletcher and then phone Connie to put a tail on Carol in case she did know where Joe Finch was hiding. Instead, he merely sat on the bed feeling very tired. He'd argued with Carol Fletcher and now she was an enemy. The conflict between duty and family was too much to overcome, as Fletcher was finding out. Maybe it was impossible for a good policeman to be a good husband, too. Maybe his dream of marrying Molly Calendar had been doomed from the beginning.

On Thursday morning, Leopold went out to the Greenways plant alone. Fletcher had asked to be transferred from the case that morning, and Leopold had respected his request. He assigned Connie Trent in Fletcher's place, and asked him to brief her on it. But right now he was alone because there were people he wanted to interview. First on his list was the robbery victim.

Kevin Bryer was a young man with a neat mustache and a businesslike manner. He worked in the Greenways payroll office and he'd been alone there Tuesday morning when the robber entered. "Do I have to tell it all again?" he asked plaintively when Leopold introduced himself.

"I'm afraid so. One more time."

"All right. What do you want to know?"

"How long have you worked at Greenways, Kevin?"

"Two years next month."

"Ever have any robberies before?"

"No. Nothing. I was thinking the job was a bit dull, in fact—just cashing checks and things like that."

"Tell me everything that happened Tuesday morning."

"Well, there's not much to tell. I was alone a little before noon when suddenly the door opened and this guy with a ski-mask over his head is standing there, pointing a gun at me."

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"What sort of gun?"

"A short-barreled revolver. A .38, I think—like the detectives use on TV."

Leopold brought out his Smith & Wesson. "Like this?"

"Yeah."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing at all. He just motioned with the gun and I knew what he wanted."

"Maybe he was afraid you'd recognize his voice. How was he built?"

Kevin Bryer shrugged. "About your height, but thinner."

"White or black?"

"White. I could see the skin on his neck and around the eyes."

"What about his hands?"

"He was wearing gloves."

"What else did he have on?"

"Baggy jeans and a leather jacket with a sweatshirt under it. None of the clothes seemed to fit too well."

"What about his feet?"

"I didn't notice."

"So you gave him the money?"

"Sure thing—he was waving that pistol at me. I tried some small bills first but he pointed the gun and made it clear he wanted bigger ones."

"All without speaking?"

"Yeah. So I shoved over some stacks of hundreds, and that was when I managed to trip the silent alarm that brings the security guards. He shoved the money into a bag he was carrying and backed out the door about a second before Marvin Wise came running up. I saw Wise take off after him, and then I heard two shots."

"Did Wise fire?"

"I guess not. They said the bandit shot him twice."

"Which way was he running? Toward the gate?"

"No, back into the plant."

"So you figure it was an employee."

"It had to be," Bryer replied. "They're pretty strict at the gate. No one gets in without an appointment, and then they have to be escorted by a security guard. Otherwise it would be too easy to steal things."

"Why the tight security? Your plastic products don't seem that valuable."

"Oh, some of them are. But mainly it's because we do lots of

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subcontract work for the auto industry. If we didn't have tight security, they wouldn't let us work on parts of their new models."

"I see. Tell me, do you know Joe Finch?"

"Yeah, I know him a little, like everyone who comes in here for their pay. I heard he's disappeared."

"Any chance he could have been the one who held you up?"

"I've been thinking about that, and I'm not sure. I suppose he's about the right build, but I just don't know."

Next Leopold went in search of Bernie McGrath, the foreman, and found him checking a sheet of production figures. "Oh—hello there," McGrath said. "It's Captain Leopold, isn't it? What can I do for you?"

"Two things. The first is a question about your security guards. I've been walking around here pretty freely without seeing any, except at the gate when I arrived. How many are there?"

"Well, we have one at each of the four gates, and then there are another four on duty inside the plant. When we're running extra shifts, we have to hire extra gate guards, of course, but the security service provides them. Right now there are just the eight."

"Next question: Could I talk to the men who were working with Joe Finch on Tuesday morning?"

"Sure." McGrath consulted a stack of pink time-sheets. "Come this way."

Soon they were back among the extruding machines, and Leopold noticed that another man was now operating Finch's machine. "Tommy," McGrath asked, "were you working with Joe on Tuesday?"

The slim young man turned and looked at them. "No, I was filling the hoppers. I saw him, but we didn't get to talk."

"Who was on this machine across the aisle?"

"Gert Provest."

"Where is she now?"

"She's out in the warehouse, getting a load of pellets."

McGrath nodded. "We'll see her there."

They went back out through the locker room to a large connecting building where wheeled hampers full of colored plastic pellets stood in line. Leopold paused to scoop up a handful of the pellets. "There must be a million of them in each hamper," he marveled.

"Possibly—but it's only enough for one hour's production when the machines are running at full speed. The pellets are mixed to achieve exactly the right color match, then heated to their melting

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point and extruded as vinyl beading. The operator checks the color periodically and keeps the hopper full of pellets."

Leopold remembered Gert Provest from the previous day. She was a plain, thin girl in her twenties who wore her bleached hair in a tight bun at the back of her head. A few pimples on her cheek were covered with salve. She stopped pushing one of the empty hampers long enough to answer Leopold's question. "Tuesday? Sure, I was working the machine across from Joe."

"Did you go to lunch when he did?"

"I didn't take a lunch break. We were short-handed, and when I shut down my machine I worked out here for an hour, loading pellets into these hampers while the guys went to eat." She positioned one beneath a narrow chute and pulled a lever, releasing a steady stream of yellow pellets from some unseen source.

"Pushing these hampers when they're full must be hard work," Leopold said.

She turned to face him, their eyes at the same level. "I figure I get a man's pay, so I do a man's work."

"Did you see Joe at all during the lunch hour?"

Gert Provest shook her head. "Not after he left his machine."

"How did he seem that morning? Nervous, tense?"

"He was the same as always."

"Was he especially friendly toward you or any of the other young women? Did he ever invite anyone out for a drink after work?"

"No." She smiled slightly. "He was married, wasn't he?"

"Yes, he was married," Leopold agreed. "Thanks for your help, Miss Provest."

As they returned to the manufacturing building, Bernie McGrath asked, "What about Joe's car? It hasn't been found, has it?"

"No," Leopold agreed. He hadn't given any thought to the car. "Where did Joe park it?"

"Everyone's assigned a space in the lot across the road." McGrath walked to a desk at one end of the first row of extruding machines and flipped through the pages on a clipboard. "Joe Finch has space number C-44."

"Thanks for your help," Leopold said, "I'll try not to bother you again."

"No bother at all."

Leopold crossed the street and walked up and down the rows of parked cars until he found the space marked C-44. It was empty. The car was gone, along with Joe Finch . . .

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Back at headquarters, Fletcher listened glumly to Leopold's account of his visit to Greenways. "I could have told you the car was gone," he said. "That's the first thing I checked when Joe turned up missing. It's in the wanted bulletin we sent out on him. What's so important about the car?"

"I don't know, Fletcher. Maybe I'm clutching at straws." Leopold glanced around the squadroom. "Did you brief Connie on the case?"

"Yeah. She's gone out to talk to the dead man's widow. She thinks maybe Wise recognized the bandit and that's why he was killed."

Leopold shook his head. "It was a spur-of-the-moment killing, to avoid capture. But I might take a drive out to visit Stella Finch."

"Stella? What for, Captain?"

"I want to ask her about Joe's car."

When he reached the Finch house a half hour later, it seemed at first to be empty. Then he saw that Stella's car was in the garage and he rang the bell. After a time she answered it, and he suspected he'd awakened her. "Have you found him?" she asked.

"No, Stella, I'm sorry. There's no new word. But I have a couple of questions I'd like to ask you if it's all right."

"Come in," she said reluctantly, stepping aside so he could enter. The curtains were drawn and the living room was in semi-darkness. "What was it you wanted to know?"

He turned to face her without sitting down. She made no move to open the draperies. "It's about Joe's car. Did he have it at work Tuesday?"

"Of course. He always drove it to work."

"Stella, I've been thinking about the car. And about the ski-mask."

"What about them?"

"Why would Joe bother wearing the mask if he was going to reveal his identity anyway by fleeing in his car immediately after the robbery?"

"I have no answer to that question because I'm not ready to admit that Joe did all this."

"Neither am I. But if Joe didn't use his car to leave the scene with the stolen money, he used it for some other purpose. He didn't drive downtown to see Fletcher. Is it possible he came home for lunch, after all?"

"Certainly not. I'd have seen him if he did. I wouldn't have called you if he'd come home."

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"You might have," Leopold said, "if something happened here at the house—if you wanted it to seem as if he was still at work."

Her face was a frozen mask. "Are you accusing me of something, Captain?"

No, he realized, he wasn't. He had no evidence to accuse her of anything. And yet, if Joe Finch hadn't robbed the company and hadn't driven home, where had he gone in his car? "I'm accusing you only of being less than frank, Stella. You must know why Joe might have been going to see Fletcher."

She turned away, and he realized that for all her stony exterior she was close to tears. After a moment she replied, "Joe wanted a gun permit. He thought his brother-in-law could help him. I didn't have any reason to think he went down to headquarters on Tuesday, but when he didn't come home that was the only possibility that came to mind. So I called you."

"A gun permit? Why didn't you tell us earlier?"

"Because a gun was used in the robbery and killing. I was afraid it would look suspicious. But he hadn't even bought it yet. He was just looking at one to have around the house."

Leopold sighed. "Was he going to buy it from someone at work?"

"No, from a gun shop. Joe would never do anything illegal."

"All right," Leopold said. "Thanks for telling me, Stella."

Leopold had arranged to meet Molly for a late lunch at one o'clock. She had to be back in court by two, and he could tell from her face that it wasn't going well. "I'm getting a complex about judges," she said, filling him in quickly on her frustrating morning. In return he told her about Carol Fletcher's visit the previous night and his call on Stella Finch. "I shouldn't be bothering you with my troubles," Molly decided. "You've got enough of your own."

"I was especially bothered by Carol," he admitted. "It got me thinking that maybe cops shouldn't marry. Maybe it's best to stay celibate, like priests."

"Oh, rubbish! You're too sensible to believe that!"

"I'm wondering about us, Molly. I see this thing tearing Carol and Fletcher apart and I wonder what something similar would do to us."

"I suppose it would make us miserable. But it wouldn't make us stop loving one another."

He went back to headquarters feeling better. Connie was waiting for him with a report on her interview with Marvin Wise's widow.

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"I didn't think you'd find much there," he said.

"You were right. Until Finch turns up, I think we've hit a dead end with this case. Here's the lab report on that ski-mask you found in his locker."

"Thanks, Connie. Anything in it?"

"No hair, but they found a greasy spot of some sort."

Leopold let his eyes scan down the report until he found the phrase "a common over-the-counter medicinal ointment."

He said to Connie, "Get Fletcher. We're going out to Greenways."

"I thought he was off the case."

"He's back on it."

Leopold sought out a hectic Bernie McGrath. "Which color of those vinyl pellets are you running least of right now?"

The foreman looked blank, then replied, "Tan, I suppose. We haven't used any number-five tan in weeks."

Leopold thanked him and hurried away. He entered the big warehouse and walked down the rows of pellet-filled hampers until he found three tan loads tucked away in a corner. As soon as he got close, his nose picked up the trace of a familiar, unpleasant odor. He started scooping tan pellets out of one of the hampers, tossing them onto the adjoining loads. In a few minutes he uncovered an arm, and then the rest of the body. Joe Finch had been found at last.

"I was afraid you'd find him," a voice behind him said. He turned and saw Gert Provest pointing a revolver at him.

"I've come to arrest you, Gert," he said.

She fired twice as he dropped to the floor, and then Fletcher and Connie moved in from either side, grabbing and subduing her before she could fire again. "It's all right, Captain!" Fletcher called out.

Leopold watched Connie put handcuffs on her, then said grimly, "You'd better come with me, Fletcher. You stay here, Connie—read her her rights."

Fletcher walked over to the hamper. He stared at the body of his brother-in-law and managed to say, "I knew he wasn't a killer. I knew something bad must have happened to him."

"Something bad, yes. Gert Provest stole the money and killed the security guard. She ran in here, or into the adjoining locker room, to remove her ski-mask and the baggy clothes she'd worn over her blouse and jeans. Joe was unlucky enough to see her, so she killed him, too. She was probably wild with panic after shooting the guard. Maybe he had his key out to open his locker. Anyway, she got the

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keys and put his body in an empty hamper, then rolled it over to a chute and filled it with vinyl pellets. I figured if she was trying to hide the body she'd choose a color that wasn't used much." He turned to the handcuffed woman. "He'd have been found sooner or later. What were you going to do with him?"

"The weekend. I could have gotten him out over the weekend."

"How'd you know where to look, Captain?" Connie asked.

"Once I suspected she'd done it, this was the only likely place the body could be. I knew she'd spent the lunch hour here in the warehouse, loading hampers while the guys were at lunch. She'd told me that much. I figured it was easy for her to go out the door and run around to the payroll office in her ski-mask. After she came back and shot Joe, muffling the sound or hoping it wouldn't be noticed among the regular factory noises, she hid him under the pellets and then put the ski-mask in his locker to implicate him. She had his car keys, along with the others, so she drove his car out of the lot and hid it. Want to tell us where, Gert?"

"Down the river bank," she mumbled without looking up.

Leopold went on. "I'd pretty much ruled out Joe as the killer from the beginning. Bryer, the man who was robbed, glimpsed the skin of the killer's neck beneath the ski mask. Joe had a bushy beard, and even if he'd tucked it into the mask I was pretty sure some neck hairs would have shown. And there'd almost certainly have been stray hairs inside the mask when the lab examined it. But there weren't any, because Gert wears her hair in a tight bun. What we did find were traces of the greasy salve she uses on her face."

"But the description indicated the killer was a man," Connie protested.

"A thin man, as she is thin, wearing baggy clothes to conceal her shape. The killer never spoke during the robbery. Bryer said he, or she, was about my height, which she is."

Fletcher looked grim. "Can you two take care of things here? I have to tell Carol and Stella."

"Go ahead," Leopold said. "Tell them how sorry I am."

When Fletcher left, Connie said, "It hasn't been easy for him."

"No, and this now is the hardest part of all."

Three weeks later, Leopold and Molly were married at a small wedding in a church near the courthouse. Fletcher was Leopold's best man. Carol Fletcher cried after the ceremony, but Leopold knew they were tears of happiness.

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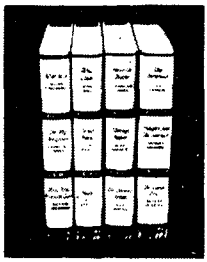

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A man's been shot quite dead.
He's lying in my study and
The carpet's turning red.
With stealth he broke into my house—
To rob me, there's no doubt.
I grabbed my gun and rushed downstairs
To put the lout to rout.
Yes, I fired the gun three times—
To scare him, don't you see?
It's too bad the bullets hit him—
In the dark I couldn't see.
You say the man's my neighbor
With the beautiful wife?
Isn't that a coincidence—
One of the quirks of life.
I've seen her only a few times
On her way to or from the store.
Simply neighbors is what we are,
Just that and nothing more.
Of course, I didn't lure him here,
Planning to take his life!
You are insane implying that
I coveted his wife.
You don't believe a word I've said?
You say my plot must fail?
Ah, well, what better cause than love
Could send a man to jail.
You say it's she who turned me in?
She said she'd testify?
Oh, the perfidy of women
Is enough to make you cry!

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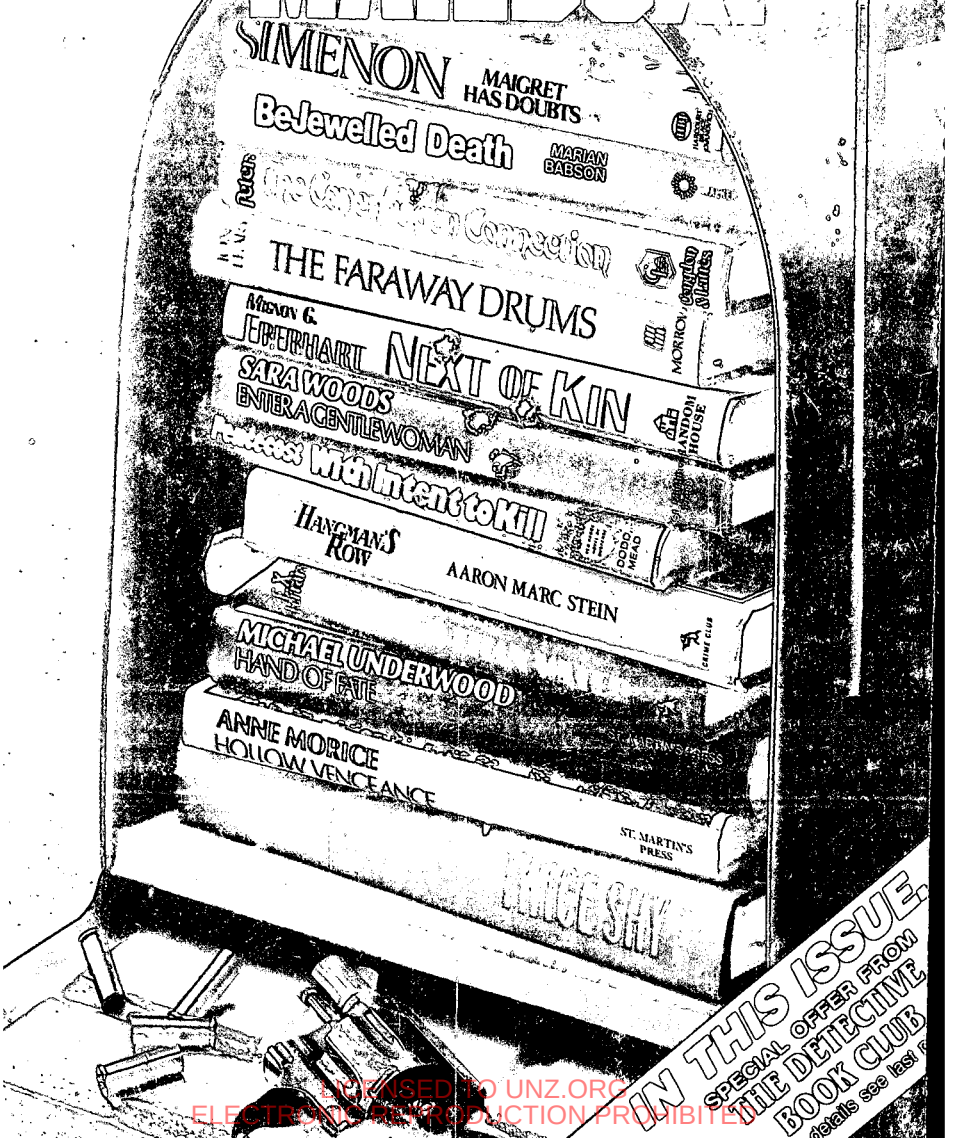

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